GOOGLE'S ACHILLES' HEEL | FALLOWS AMONG THE PANDAS | THE CASE AGAINST HOMEOWNERSHIP

THE Atlantic

DECEMBER 2007

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WHY OBAMA MATTERS

BY ANDREW SULLIVAN

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2,000 BOTTLES OF WINE IN HIS CELLAR AND SOMEHOW HE'S NEVER LOST TOUCH WITH HIS INNER MEATLOAF.

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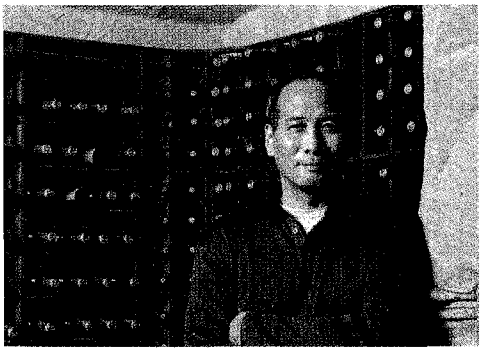

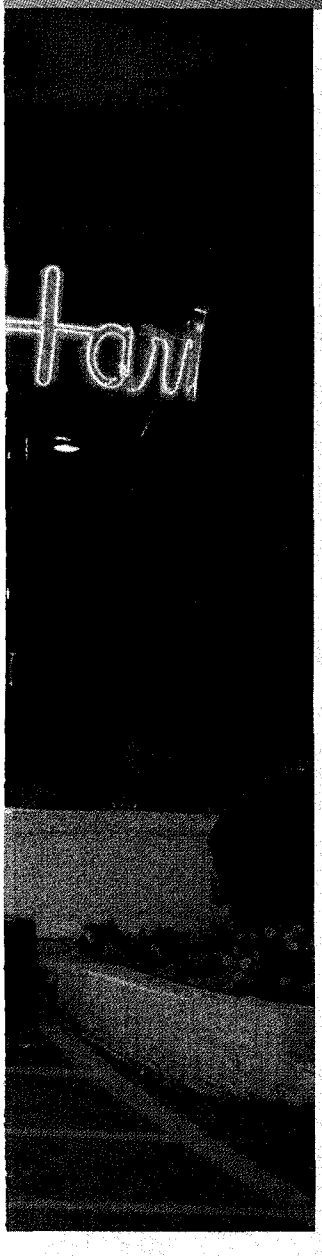

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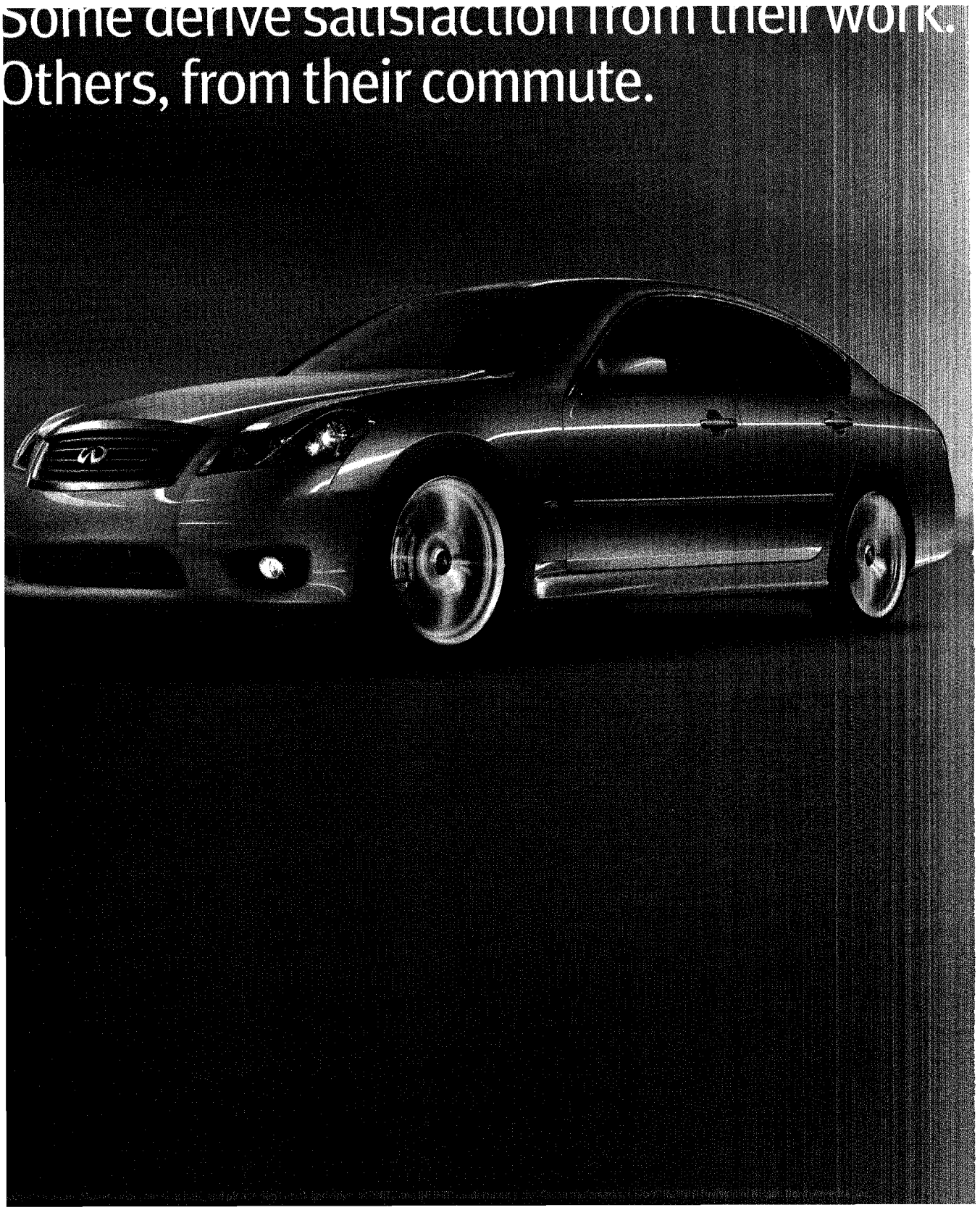

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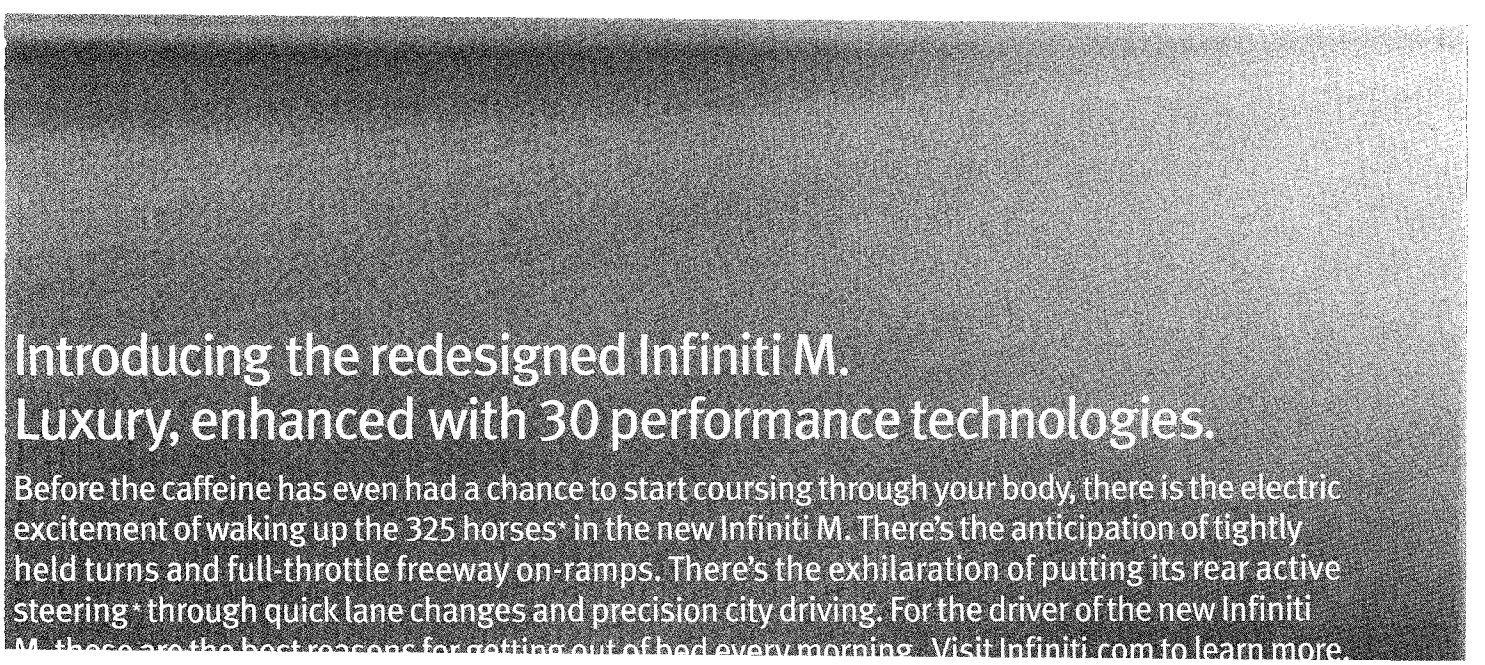

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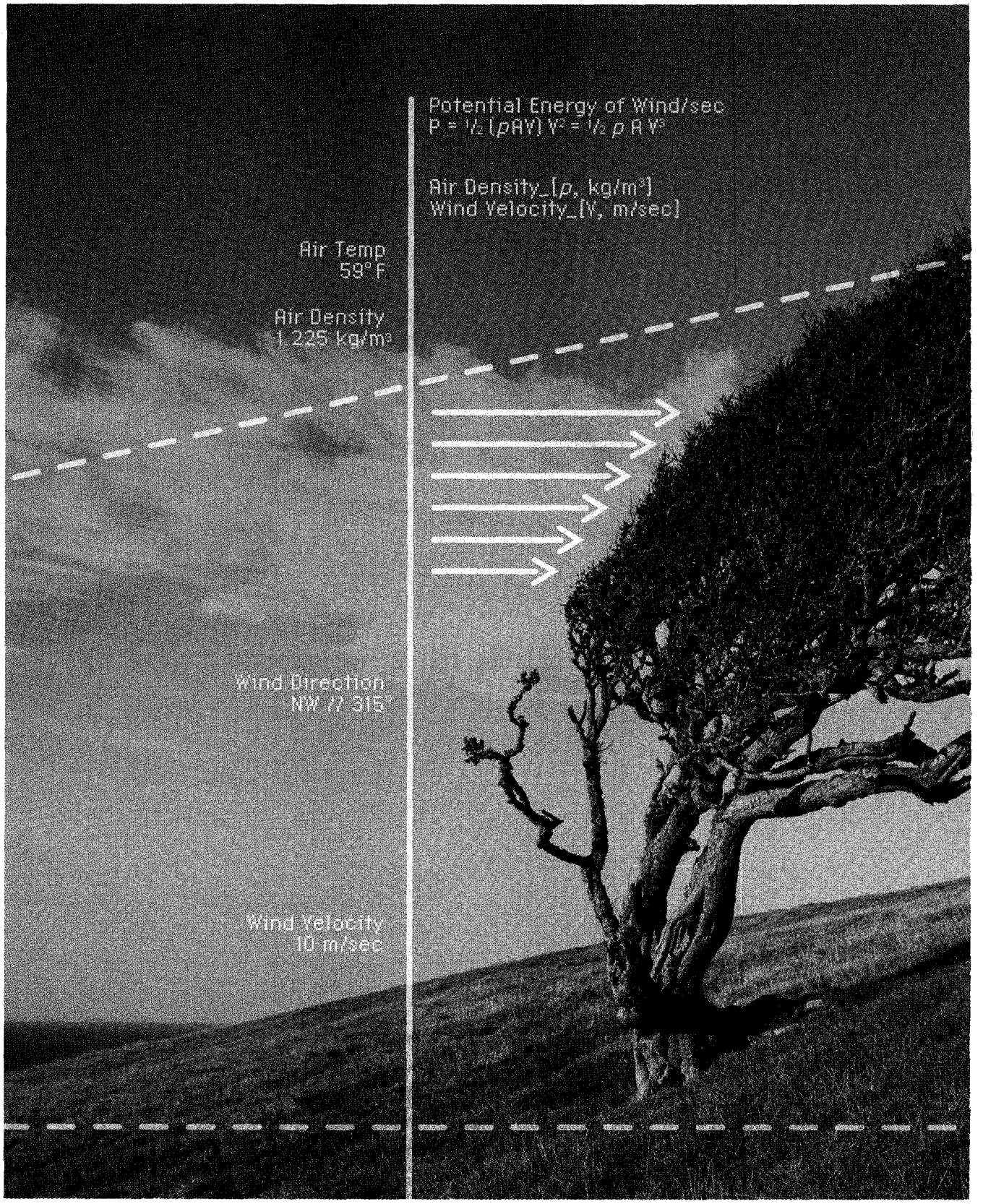

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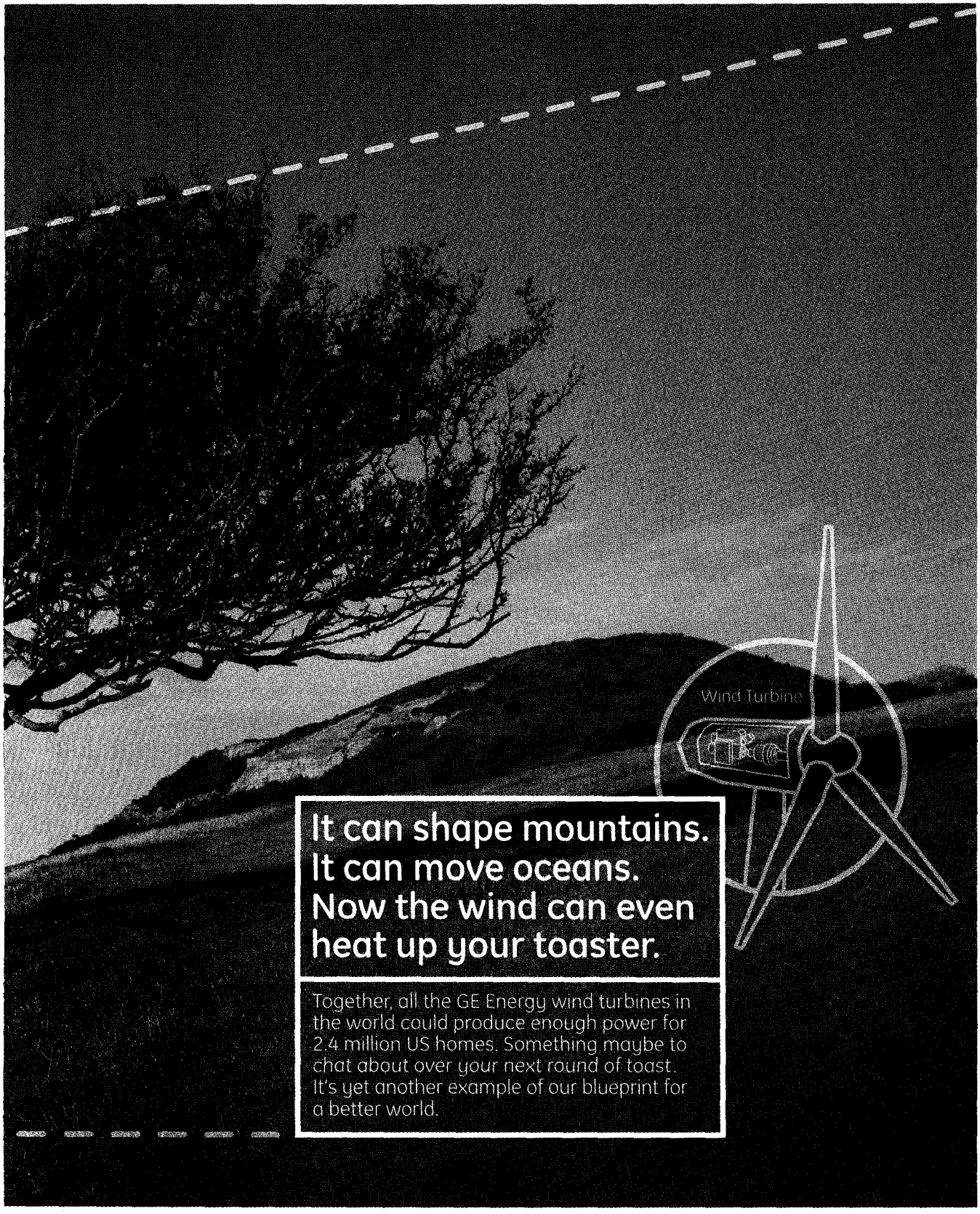

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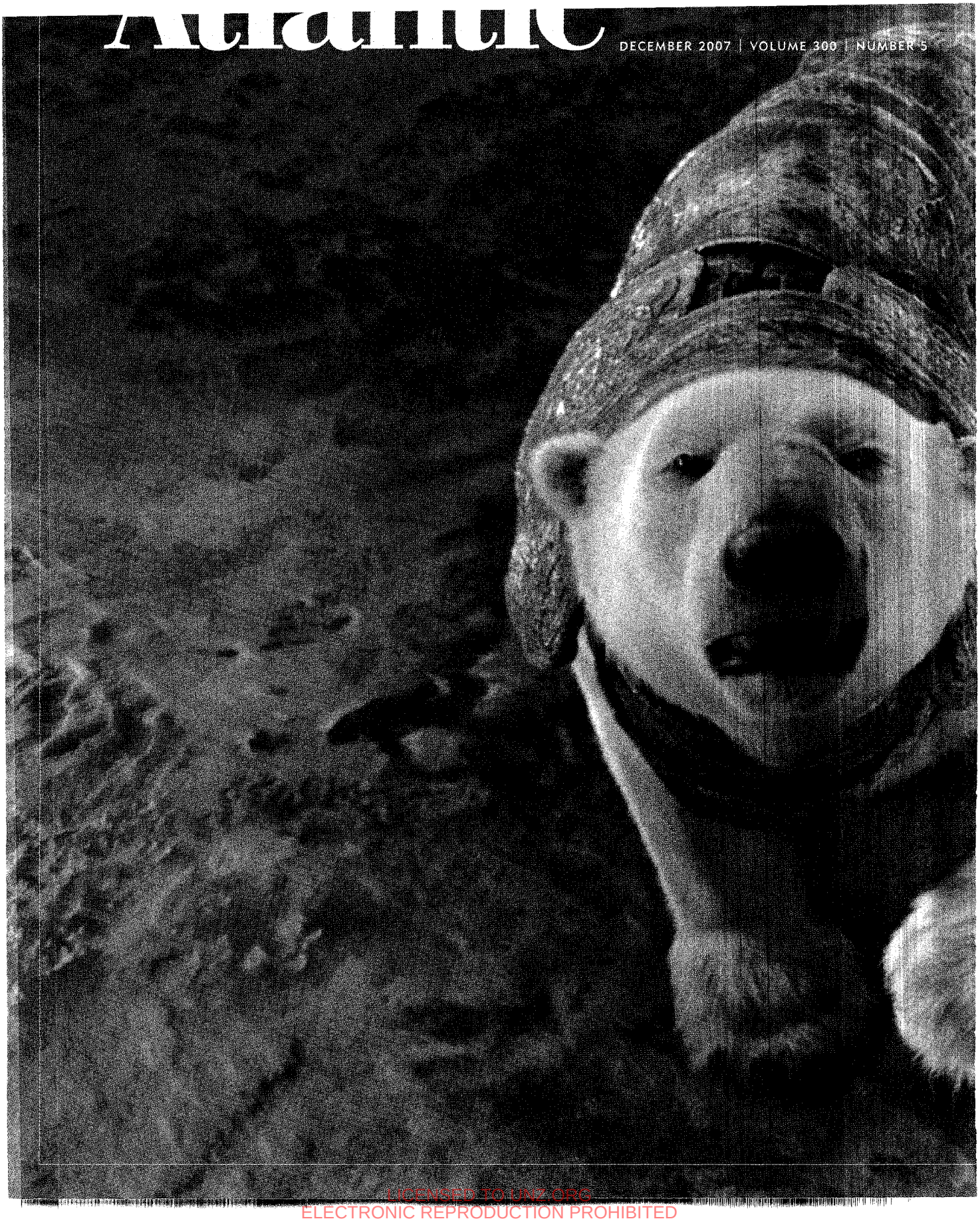

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The Issue in Brief

THE Atlantic

DECEMBER 2007 | VOLUME 300 | NUMBER 5

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POLARIZED
Deposed bear king Iorek Byrnison asserts himself in a still from the screen adaptation of Philip Pullman's fantasy novel *The Golden Compass*. Hanna Rosin recounts the backroom wrangling sparked by the book's antireligious content in "How Hollywood Saved God."

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SLIDESHOW: PANDA LAND
Atlantic national correspondent James Fallows narrates photos from his visit to the Wolong Nature Reserve in China, a place of beauty and unrivaled panda density.

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Photomosaic of Barack Obama, from a portrait by Brooks Kraft

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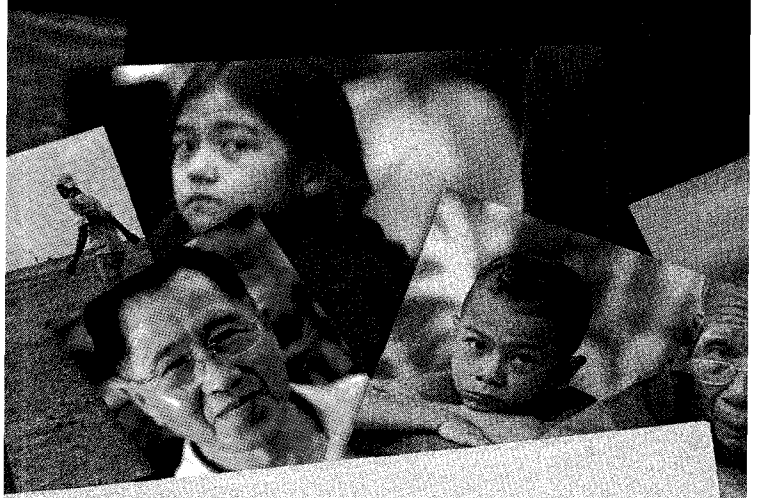

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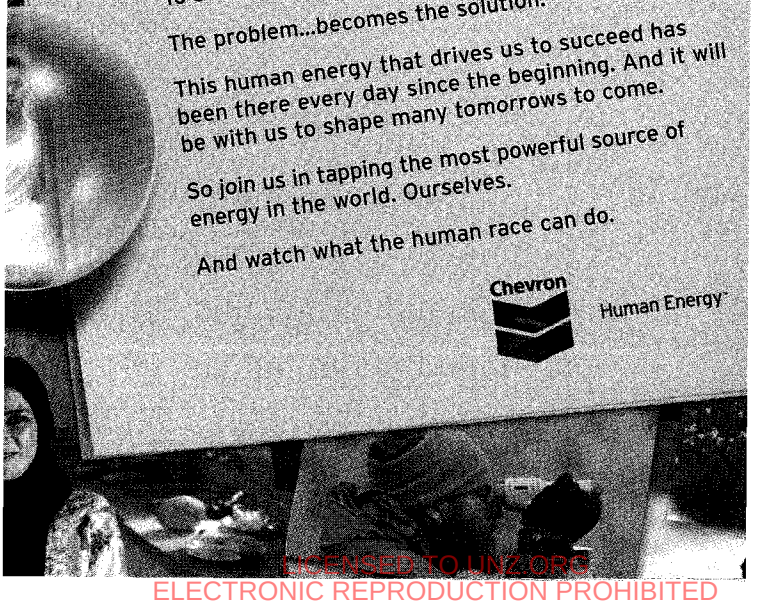

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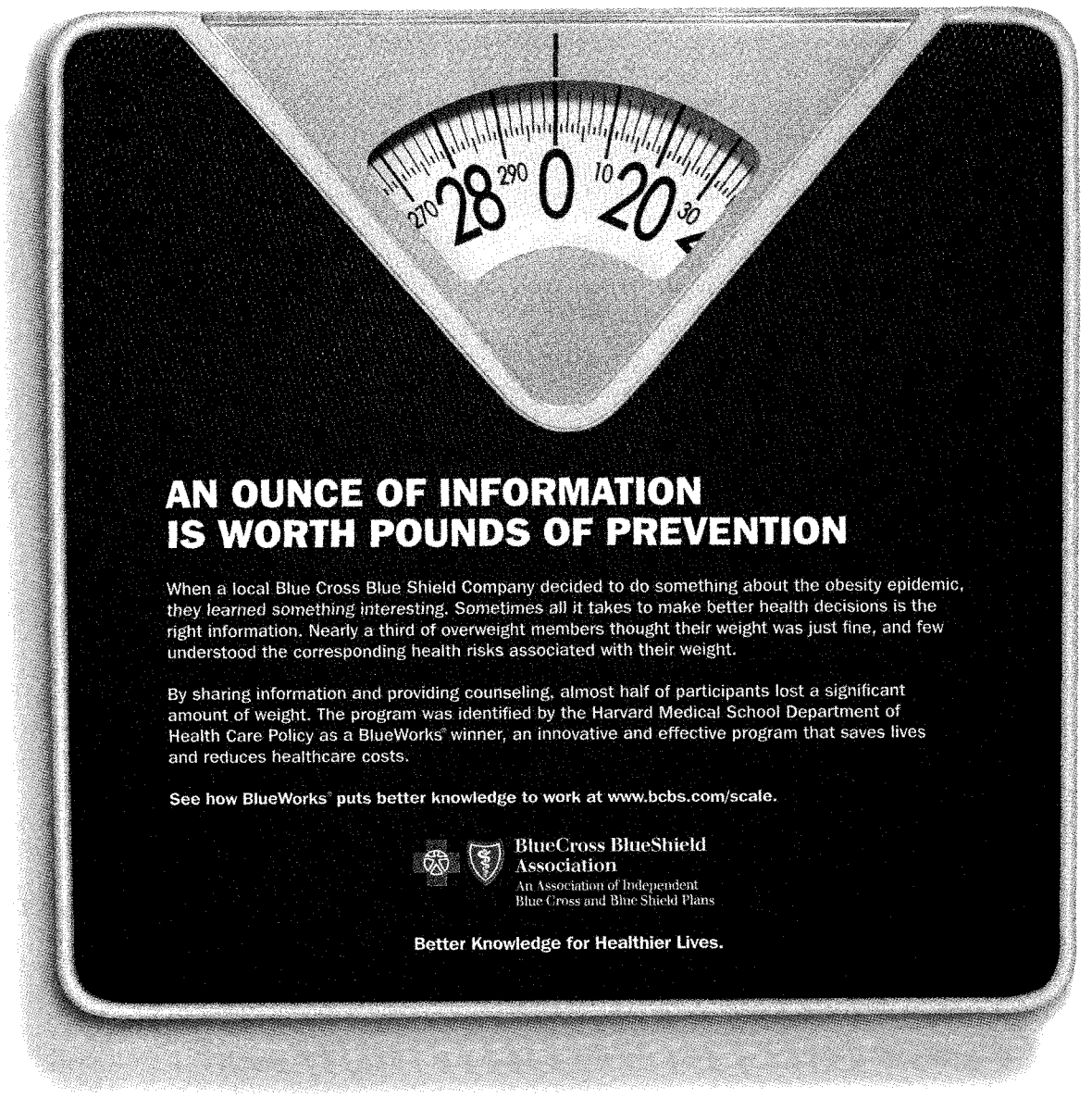

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE SPEECHWRITER'S TALE

Matthew Scully imbues his piece ("Present at the Creation," September *Atlantic*) with a lighthearted, at times almost comic tone—a tone that has no place in anything written about the Bush administration. Was I supposed to chuckle when I read that speechwriter John McConnell would "favor" his fellow propagandists "with one of his impersonations"? This glibness serves no purpose other than to humanize three people—Scully, McConnell, and Michael J. Gerson—who contributed so eloquently to some of the greatest domestic- and foreign-policy disasters in our nation's history.

Scully's story is just one more example of the administration's tone-deaf inability to understand that many people are as repulsed by their attempts at humor—like George W. Bush's looking-for-weapons-of-mass-destruction skit performed at the Radio and Television Correspondents Association dinner in 2004, and "MC" Rove's rap performance at this year's dinner—as they are by hearing Bush utter phrases like *axis of evil*.

Scully seems unaware he's clamoring to take credit for what any sensible person would hire a criminal attorney to deny: putting words in the mouth of a corrupt, discredited, and globally despised politician.

Robert Rosen
New York, N.Y.

Matthew Scully's "Present at the Creation" quotes from the post-9/11 joint session speech by President George W. Bush, "We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail," and adds, with admiration, "It was a case of presidential speechwriting working exactly as it should, with the words spoken by the very man who inspired them."

Well, actually it was another man. I find it exceedingly odd for a senior presidential speechwriter not to have recognized those inimitable cadences from the most brilliant political speechwriter in all of history: Winston Churchill.

On February 9, 1941, the day after the House passed the Lend-Lease Act (which the Senate was to pass two days later), Churchill, in a radio broadcast beamed to the United States, said:

> Put your confidence in us. Give us your faith and your blessing, and, under Providence, all will be well. We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle, nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we will finish the job.

Apparently, while Mike Gerson was claiming exclusive credit for the joint efforts of the West Wing speechwriting staff, their boss was claiming credit for words spoken some five years before his birth.

Raphael Shevelev
El Cerrito, Calif.

THE ROVE LEGACY

While I thoroughly enjoyed Joshua Green's insightful piece on Karl Rove ("The Rove Presidency," September *Atlantic*), I was struck by an omission in the story. Green does a wonderful job of focusing on Rove's penchant for sowing "interparty divisions as an electoral strategy," but he curiously neglects to mention the Rove strategy's effect on centrist Senator Jim Jeffords, who decided to switch from Republican to Democrat-leaning independent in the summer of 2001—a decision that cost the GOP control of the Senate. Having covered the Jeffords switch as a reporter for *Congressional Quarterly*, I recall that the senator's decision was influenced in large part by the bare-knuckled and threatening posture Rove and the White House took on the president's tax-cut plan earlier that year. One might argue that Jeffords's switch represented the first big blunder of Rove's tenure.

Emily Pierce
Washington, D.C.

Given the Bush administration's many shortcomings and errors of judgment, it is easy to see why Joshua Green has deemed this presidency a failure. But in awarding a final grade, he should take all aspects of performance into account. In examining these last seven years objectively, we should not disregard the fact that North Korea, a nuclear threat, has now all but agreed to disarm; that the economy is, and has been, humming along with low inflation; that crime is down nationwide; and that anyone owning real property has probably seen his asset double (or more) in value. And, most important, and not for want of trying, there has been no terrorist attack on American soil.

On balance, perhaps, the deserved grade is the ever-familiar "Gentleman's C."

Michael E. Zuller
Great Neck, N.Y.

Joshua Green writes that Karl Rove "is a great devotee of the historian Robert H. Wiebe," who, like Rove, emphasized the pivotal quality of the 1896 McKinley election. This Rove-Wiebe bond can only be explained by careless reading. Wiebe's history *The Search for Order 1877–1920* tells of the gradual rise of the modern bureaucratic, expert-manager federal government. Theodore Roosevelt initiated it, Woodrow Wilson vastly enlarged it during World War I, and Herbert Hoover's planning and banking initiatives completed the process.

Yes, 1896 provided a crucial realignment of farm and city voters, but that realignment was, as Wiebe tells it, secured by deeper and more-enduring social and economic processes. The new

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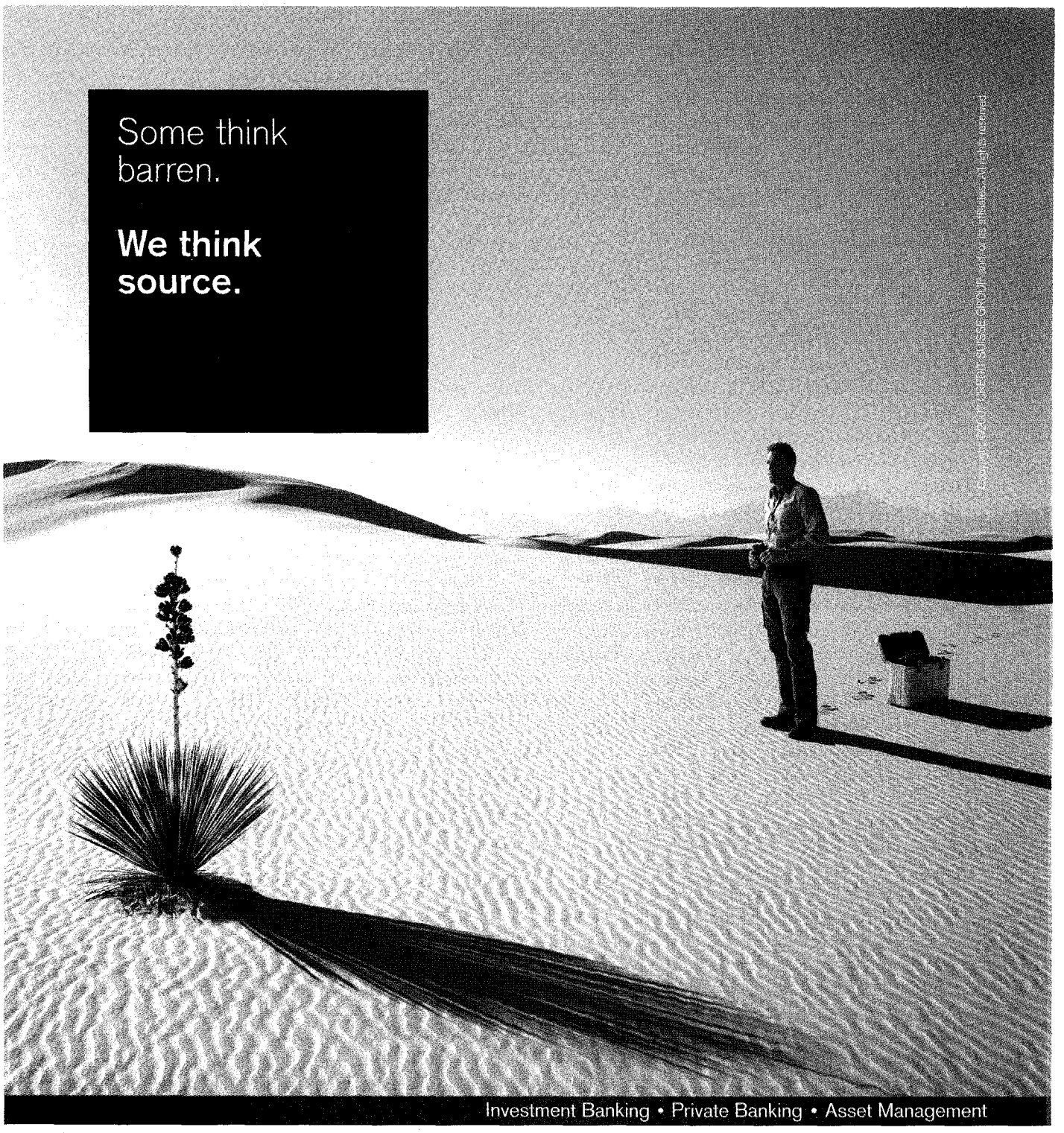

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way of ordering American life began first in the business corporation and then spread to municipal governments, states, and the federal government. The federal institutions put in place by Republican businessmen and reformers are the very ones Rove and George W. Bush have set about destroying.

Sam Bass Warren
Needham, Mass.

THE FOODIE'S DILEMMA

I appreciated B. R. Myers's critique of Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* ("Hard to Swallow," September *Atlantic*). But I have been torn between my admiration of Pollan's ability to convey so effectively the absurd and troubling realities of the modern American food industry, and my dismay at his dismissal of ethical vegetarianism as a viable choice.

It's not that Pollan doesn't think in moral terms—the whole book is a moral, as well as practical, critique. It's that he seems unwilling to seriously engage moral considerations that might interfere with the efficiency of the small, local-farming utopia he holds up.

Marianne Arbogast
Detroit, Mich.

B. R. Myers alleges that gastronomes are indifferent to the suffering of food animals. But who today plucks the tongues of larks or hummingbirds, or fattens ortolans in cages? Yes, Julie Powell and Michael Pollan, in odd and unfortunate paragraphs, do echo a version of Genesis 1:26, wherein flying, swimming, quadruped, and legless creatures are condemned to the dominion of humans. But most of us kill our lobsters swiftly and humanely, with the sharp point of a heavy chef's knife at the juncture of head and body, then split and broil the creature or dismember him (preferably her) in a hot pan with a mirepoix. Our victims suffer nothing and taste better that way; Powell is merely late in getting the news. Our Wagyu steers are anesthetized before bleeding and pampered while alive; our chickens and pigs range free. We eschew bluefin tuna as too noble for the table (squid, herring, and mackerel, good enough for bluefin, are good enough for us), as well as any species deemed endangered or inhumanely raised or killed. Our salmon are wild and line-caught, our bivalves handled more humanely than by any other ostreophage, winged or pedalian.

To the end, Myers offers only a visceral, incoherent veganism in place of the serious ethical critique he leads us to expect.

David Dunlap
West Plains, Mo.

It is easy to imagine a bruised and dazed Michael Pollan picking himself up off the floor and wondering how he managed to walk into B. R. Myers's buzz saw of a book review. I read *The Omnivore's Dilemma* when it came out, and have sampled Pollan's writings from both before and after the book's release; I simply don't recognize the amoral glutton portrayed in Myers's jeremiad. In fact, the titular dilemma is spelled out as *What should we eat?* The word *should* defines distinctly moral questions, and Pollan doesn't shy away from them. But Myers simply can't tolerate the fact that Pollan arrives—rather tentatively—at a different answer than he does.

Rob Lewis
Langley, Wash.

B. R. Myers replies:
I disagree with Rob Lewis; it is not easy to imagine a bruising buzz saw, nor to imagine a writer getting upset about a review that describes much of his book as a tour de force. If my article conveys the impression that Michael Pollan is amoral, it does so less through my own writing than through lengthy excerpts from The Omnivore's Dilemma. *Here I need only mention the passage in which the "journalist/philosopher," as the back cover calls him, expresses pity for people who want to live more-virtuous lives. David Dunlap, for his part, employs a rhetorical strategy popular among letter-writing hunters, which is to demand that we judge a group not by its average representatives but by its "true"—i.e., ideal—ones. Or does Dunlap really believe that American foodies eat Wagyu beef, which can cost over $100 a pound, more often than they eat lobsters that have been boiled alive? In any case, the most highly prized form of the beef in question comes from cows who are kept indoors all day with nothing to do except eat and drink. I can see why a gourmet would regard such treatment as enviable "pampering," but animals tend to want more from life.*

DEBATING THE B-2

Robert D. Kaplan is right to applaud the dedication of B-2 air and maintenance crews ("The Plane That Would Bomb Iran," September *Atlantic*). Yet he is too sanguine about the implications of this weapon system. Does the B-2 deter "rogue" nations, or does it encourage them to seek less-conventional ways of striking at us—ways that do not provide readily identifiable targets? Alternatively, do the unique capabilities of the B-2 and its virtual immunity to enemy countermeasures encourage our leaders to seek deceptively simple military solutions to complex geopolitical problems? Here one need only read Matthew Scully's "Present at the Creation" piece in the same issue of *The Atlantic* to be reminded of the euphoria leading up to the May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech—those quiet sirens of Baghdad, that silent desert. Tragically, "quiet" Baghdad and the "silent" desert have never ceased being killing zones.

The fact that the grandson of Colonel Paul W. Tibbets Jr. is the current squadron commander of the 393rd may have more historical resonance than Kaplan is prepared to entertain. Piloting the *Enola Gay*, Tibbets essentially inaugurated "shock and awe" at Hiroshima in August 1945. Historians still debate whether the atomic bomb hastened the war's end (I am inclined to think it did), but most agree that the sheer expense and technological enormity of the Manhattan Project, together with the cost of the B-29 as its most logical delivery system (each effort cost over $2 billion in 1945 dollars), made it difficult in the extreme for Harry Truman to decide against using atomic bombs.

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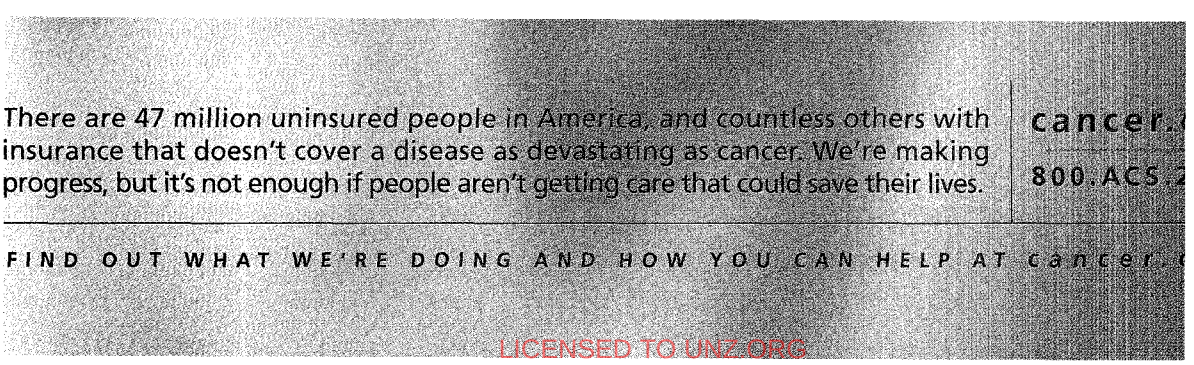

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*Estimated savings compares each U.S. HSD vehicle's EPA combined mpg rating with its segment average based on latest EPA Trends Report (driven 15k miles/yr). Actual mileage will vary. ©2007

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Will similar technological and cost imperatives encourage today's leaders to use the B-2 to awe the enemy, especially when they need risk only a handful of U.S. lives (and perhaps none, if the B-2 strikes from a distance)? If we destroy an enemy's weapons of mass destruction or persuade a rogue dictator to reform, all well and good. But for every Libya, there is an Afghanistan or an Iraq. Misguided use of the B-2 and its dedicated crews may ultimately require more boots on the ground, not fewer.

William J. Astore
Lieutenant Colonel
U.S. Air Force (Ret.)
Williamsport, Pa.

In "The Plane That Would Bomb Iran," Robert D. Kaplan reports that Air Force Captain Jim "Genghis" Price earned his call sign "by destroying a line of suspect buildings in Afghanistan with a 'stick' of 28 500-pound bombs, and then dropping cluster bombs on nearby cave entrances." This tells us a lot about the way we are fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Five-hundred-pounders are *big* bombs: Dropping 28 of them from a plane flying 500 miles per hour at 30,000 feet will do a lot of damage over a very large area, and blanketing what's left of the target with cluster bombs will make sure that there won't be many survivors. I just hope that the bombs were on target, that the buildings were more than just "suspect," and that some unsuspecting goatherds hadn't wandered into the target area.

Cluster bombs are particularly lethal and unpredictable antipersonnel weapons. Packed in canisters containing as many as 600 bomblets (each about the size and shape of a softball), and designed to scatter over a wide area and explode upon impact, cluster bombs fail at such a high rate that large numbers of bomblets remain unexploded after the combatants have left. Innocent people, especially children, see these lethal devices and, out of curiosity, pick them up or kick them, with devastating results. They are such a threat to civilians that 46 nations have joined together to ban their manufacture, sale, and use. The United States, Britain, and Israel are not among the signatories. There is, however, legislation now before the U.S. Congress that would "ban the use of cluster munitions in or near civilian populated areas, as well as the use, sale, and transfer of cluster munitions with a failure rate of more than one percent."

Norman Ewers
Colonel
U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)
Irvine, Calif.

In his piece on the B-2, Robert D. Kaplan writes that the B-52 made its debut during the Vietnam War. I believe that that formidable aircraft actually dates back to the mid-1950s.

Joe O'Connell
Gaithersburg, Md.

Robert D. Kaplan replies:
It is true that every conventional solution puts pressure on adversaries to attack us unconventionally. Assets like the B-2, although enormously expensive, can solve a lot of problems within their aerial domain, but they are not a foolproof solution to all our challenges in war. I agree that we put too much emphasis on "shock and awe," and have consequently neglected low-tech, asymmetric warfare—something I've written about in other articles. The Vietnam War, to my knowledge, was the first major conflict in which the B-52 was used in a high-profile manner.

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S SECRETS

Graeme Wood doesn't provide enough information to support his assertion that the Bush administration is "pathological" in classifying information ("Classify This," September *Atlantic*). The graph that accompanies the article shows an increase in the number of documents classified under George W. Bush, but these figures are meaningless without the total number of documents produced. While 20.6 million documents classified in 2006 is numerically high, it may be a smaller percentage of documents produced than, say, the roughly 11 million classified under President Clinton in 2000.

Steve Wilent
Zigzag, Ore.

Graeme Wood replies:
It is possible, as Steve Wilent suggests, that the number of documents produced overall has kept pace with the absolute rise in classification actions during the current administration (in which case that number would need to have nearly doubled). But these data are only one sign of secrecy fetishism; others include instructions from the Department of Justice to fight Freedom of Information Act requests, the thwarting of the government's own secrecy watchdog's inspections, and the specious logic the administration employs to justify classification practices that likely jeopardize national security.

BLOWING IN THE WIND

The item "The Fire Next Time" (Primary Sources, September *Atlantic*) shows diagrams of fallout plumes that could be produced by 550-kiloton nuclear attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Your readers should be aware that the orientation and length of the plume that would result from a nuclear explosion would depend strongly on the direction and speed of the winds aloft at the height of the mushroom cloud that would contain the radioactive debris produced by the blast. Thus, the plumes shown in the diagrams *could* result after nuclear attacks on New York and Washington, but plumes of quite different orientations and lengths could result instead. Therefore, contrary to what the diagrams suggest, the fallout plumes might well not cover Long Island and Baltimore.

Sean Barnett
Annandale, Va.

Editors' Note:
A 19th-century orator mentioned in Matthew Scully's article "Present at the Creation" (September Atlantic*) was incorrectly identified as Edward Everett Hale; he was Edward Everett. Joshua Hammer's article "After Musharraf" (October* Atlantic*) incorrectly identified Richard Armitage as an assistant secretary of state; he is a former deputy secretary of state. We regret the errors.*

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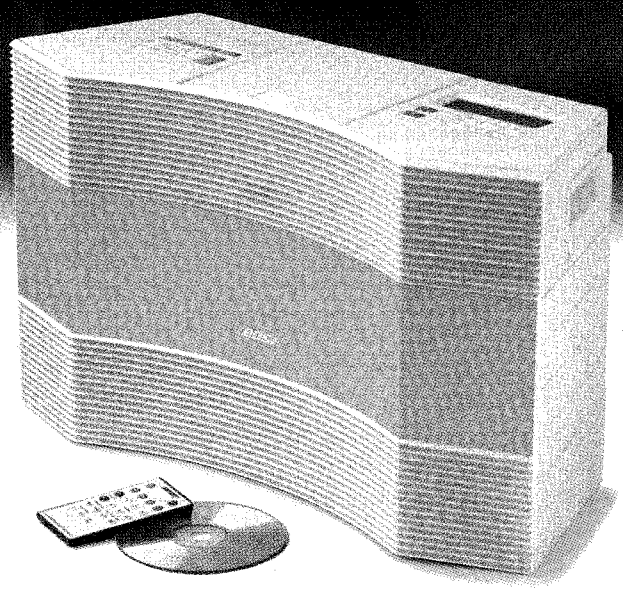

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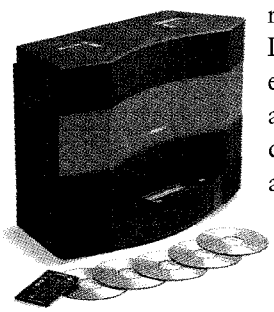

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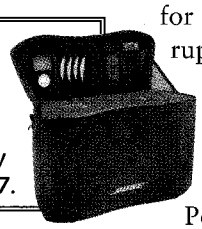

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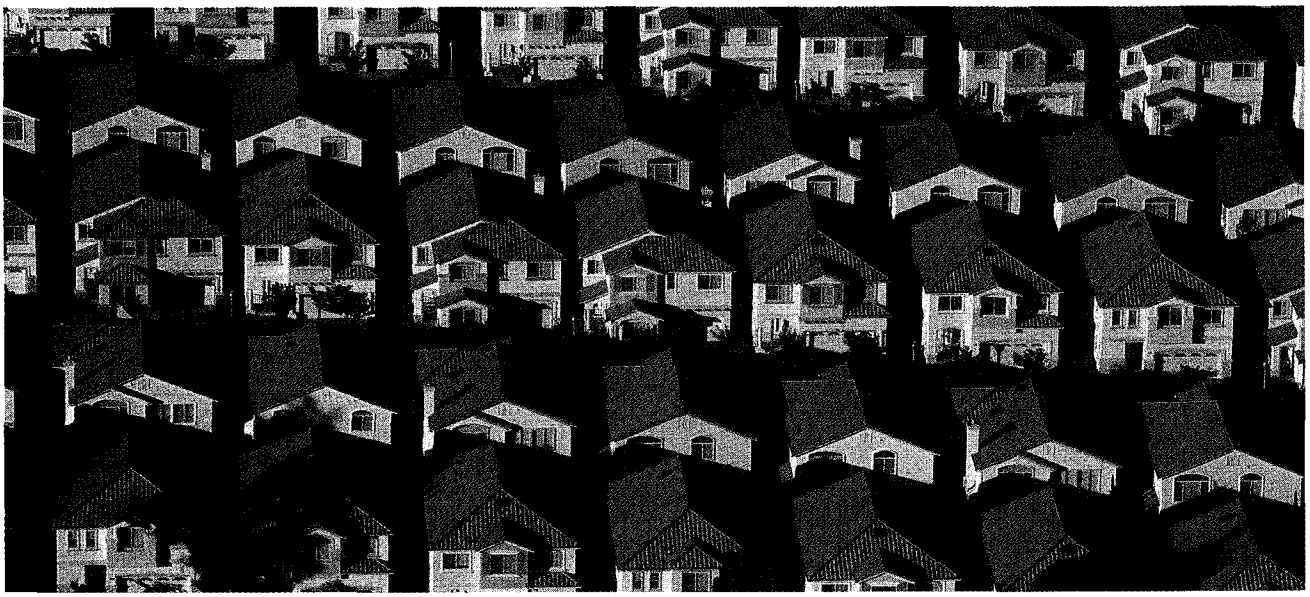

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COMMENT

Why homeownership may be bad for America

Housebound

BY CLIVE CROOK

For decades, owning a home has been one of the safest and most profitable investments an American could make, and the country has been alive to the fact. Households in the United States, taken together, spend nearly all that they earn, and save next to nothing. It is thanks only to high homeownership and rising home prices that they have seen their net worth grow. The nation's housing has been both its savings and a key enabler of economic expansion: The long boom in house prices powered consumption that would otherwise have seemed unaffordable. That is why falling house prices—something that the country as a whole has not witnessed since the 1930s—are hurting so much, and why they pose such a danger to the economy.

The cultural importance of homeownership has deep roots. In many societies, owning property was once a requirement for full citizenship, and almost all Western democracies gave property owners the vote first. Even so, the United States is unusual in the importance its citizens attach to owning a home—and, as driving through the country's endless suburbs leads one to conclude, preferably the biggest home possible. Lavish tax breaks have expressed and redoubled the enthusiasm for many rooms of one's own, and for the titanic mortgages required to pay for them. The cultural attachment came first; the tax relief duly followed. Together, they seem immovable.

Yet housing weighs heavy on the mind today. And its weight on the economy is heavier than the current downturn suggests. It's time to move beyond the subprime mortgage meltdown and ask a more fundamental question: Is it good for society that Americans aspire to own homes, rather than merely live in them?

Widespread homeownership, the theory goes, benefits the nation because homeowners—literally invested in their communities—make better citizens. A few years ago, the economists Edward Glaeser and Jesse Shapiro looked at the evidence and concluded that, by and large, this is true: Even allowing for confounding factors such as income, family size, age, and so forth, owners spend more on maintaining their homes, vote more, play a more active part in local

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politics, and work harder to improve their neighborhoods.

But there are drawbacks, too. Andrew Oswald, an economist at the University of Warwick, found that homeownership makes workers less mobile, which brakes economic growth and worsens unemployment, especially in areas blighted by the decline of locally dominant industries. Strictly speaking, whether this is a social problem is debatable. The costs of unemployment are borne mostly by the unemployed, not by others. Workers in company towns might be wise to spread their risk rather than sink their savings into a house close to the plant—but, you might argue, that is for them to decide. Yet Oswald argues that homeownership helps to calcify whole economies, which weakens the case for subsidy (and introduces the case for new taxes to discourage homeownership).

Glaeser and Shapiro point to other social costs. Communities of homeowners tend to act as cartels—calling for zoning rules, for instance, that suppress new development. At a minimum, the wider benefits of homeownership are not clear-cut.

The mortgage-interest deduction is the backbone of American housing policy. It exists, ostensibly, to encourage widespread homeownership. In its favor, it doesn't actually do that. But it does have consequences: It's been one of the quieter causes of the housing bubble. The mortgage-interest deduction deserves special recognition for the stupidity with which it subsidizes something that should not be subsidized in the first place. I challenge you to design a subsidy for homeownership that is as wasteful, as unfair, and as harmful to the economy in the long run.

The current deduction costs nearly $80 billion a year in forgone federal revenues. It is available only to the minority of households—typically affluent—that itemize their taxes. Households at the margin of choosing between renting and owning are not, for the most part, itemizers. The deduction has no effect on their choice, and thus does almost nothing to promote homeownership. What it does promote, studies show, is spending on housing—that is, people who would have been owners anyway pay more for their houses. Prices are higher than they would otherwise have been, and mortgages are bigger. As many owners have learned abruptly, this can worsen economic insecurity.

Homeownership helps to calcify whole economies. It worsens unemployment and brakes economic growth.

Heavy spending on housing, fueled by the subsidy, twists the pattern of economic growth as well. If investment in housing goes up, investment in things that would expand the economy and improve future living standards—such as commercial building and business equipment—goes down.

There are other problems. The value of the deduction, of course, is greater for those in higher tax brackets. And the code provides relief against home-equity loans up to $100,000, so that mortgagees, but not renters, can use tax-sheltered debt to buy new cars and televisions. None of this makes a shred of sense.

Is the mortgage-interest deduction untouchable? It may seem so. Ronald Reagan's grand tax reform of 1986 was radical, but not bold enough to assault the tax break for mortgages. Homeownership, he affirmed, was part of the American dream. When George W. Bush convened a panel of experts in 2005 to revisit fundamental tax reform, he told them, in effect, to leave mortgages alone.

But Britain's experience says otherwise. Under Margaret Thatcher—committed as she was to "popular capitalism," her version of the "ownership society" that Bush would later champion—Britain's mortgage-interest tax deduction began to be phased out. Some 20 years later, it's gone altogether, with no ill effects. (Perhaps unfortunately, Britain's rate of homeownership is still about as high as America's.)

The tax-reform panel advising Bush in 2005—the one he instructed to leave housing out—went ahead and called for reform anyway. Its members accepted the case for subsidizing homeownership, but they said that the mortgage-interest deduction should go. In its place, they suggested a small tax credit (worth the same amount, for a given mortgage, regardless of a person's tax bracket) capped at a maximum of a few thousand dollars a year. Whether even this much-smaller subsidy makes sense is debatable—but if such a plan were adopted, outright abolition would be but a small additional step. Mild as it is, this halfway reform would likely save tens of billions of dollars, which could be used to pay for other tax cuts—the sort that don't badly distort the economy or encourage needless risk-taking. Presented as a whole, a package like this surely ought to be sellable.

Britain's current housing-market troubles show that even without the extra spur of tax-sheltered borrowing, prices can get out of hand and then scare people witless when the mood shifts. Killing the mortgage-interest deduction does not guarantee a calm and steady housing market. And admittedly, this year is not the year to be curbing tax relief for mortgage borrowers. Falling house prices are risky enough for the economy already; the economic consequences of an outright collapse could be dire.

Still, when the housing market stabilizes, Congress and the next administration should ask how we got into this mess in the first place, and then embark on a phased reform. Its benefits would emerge only slowly. But a tax break that fuels speculation and overborrowing, that widens income inequality, and that fails to serve its own questionable purpose deserves a lingering death.

Clive Crook is an *Atlantic* senior editor.

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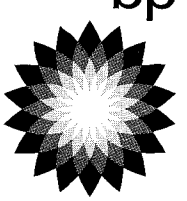

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Calendar

What to watch for in the weeks ahead

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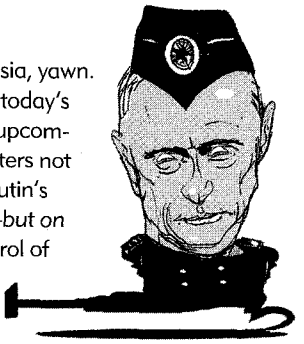
DEC 2 Putin's Jig



Election day in Russia, yawn. Speculation about today's parliamentary vote and the upcoming presidential election centers not on who will win—Vladimir Putin's party should sail to victory—but on how Putin will maintain control of Russia after he gives up the presidency.

DEC 2 Seasoned

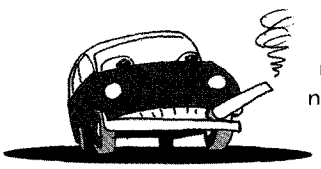
Bad news for those who finally got the Spice Girls out of their heads: The British girl group is cashing in with a nostalgia tour and greatest-hits album. While Ginger left the group in 1998, leading to a breakup in 2001, it was Sporty's acquiescence that finally brought the Girls back together.

DEC 5 Catch ...

José Padilla faces a possible life sentence today after being found guilty in August of supporting terrorism and of conspiracy to murder, kidnap, and maim overseas. The government never brought charges for the al-Qaeda dirty-bomb plot with which Padilla was originally alleged to be involved.

DEC 3–14 Emission Impossible?

With the Kyoto Protocol set to expire in 2012, negotiations on a new climate treaty begin in earnest this week in Bali. The hope is to reduce greenhouse gases to 25 to 40 percent of their 1990 levels.



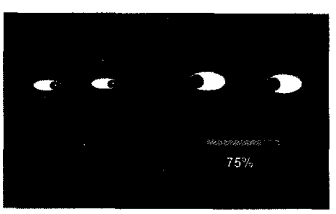
Kyoto's goal of a 5 percent reduction has yielded mixed results. The U.S. (which never ratified Kyoto) is proposing a voluntary regime.

DEC 16 ... And Release

Arthur Bremer, the would-be assassin who shot and paralyzed Alabama Governor George Wallace in 1972, is due to be released from the Maryland Correctional Institution today (though he may get out sooner if he continues to cut time off his sentence for good behavior). Bremer, whose tale inspired the movie *Taxi Driver*, won't be allowed near politicians or rallies.

DEC 21 Cloak and Blogger

Spooks join the social-networking craze this month when the director of national intelligence launches "A-space," a Facebook of sorts for the top-secret set. The spies' new tools—blogs, wikis, and Amazon-style recommendation engines—aim to spread information and surmount the intelligence agencies' "need to know" culture.



DEC 21 Roll Over, Victoria

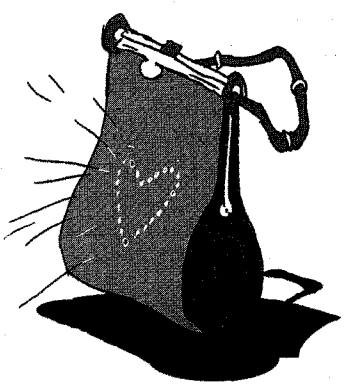
At 81 years, 8 months, and 1 day, Queen Elizabeth II will become the oldest reigning monarch in the history of Britain and the entire Commonwealth today, surpassing King George III and Queen Victoria.

DEC 29 Bound, Then Gagged

David Hicks, the so-called Australian Taliban, will be released today from a prison in Adelaide. Captured in Afghanistan, the former kangaroo skinner spent more than five years in captivity at Guantánamo before pleading guilty in March at a military tribunal. As part of a plea deal, he may not sell his story for at least a year or pursue legal action against the U.S. for alleged abuses.

ALSO IN DECEMBER

Hefty Bag



Will a shaky global economy slow spending among the superrich? Chanel hopes not. This month the Parisian fashion house unveils 13 white-alligator-skin "Diamond Forever" bags, each featuring 334 diamonds in a white-gold clasp. Price: $260,150.

Bridge of Sighs

To spare commuters a labyrinthine walk from the train to the bus station, Venice has finally built a new bridge. The modernist span—a Santiago Calatrava design in red steel—has upset sentimentalists. But the city hopes that, like the 16th-century Rialto (which has always had its critics), the new bridge will win Venetians' hearts.

DEC 31 Worn-Out Welcome

The United Nations mandate for the occupation of Iraq, which has been repeatedly extended at the request of Iraq's government, is set to expire at year's end. Though the U.S. hasn't always heeded UN concerns, the renewal could be a flash point: The Iraqi government has lately become vocal about wanting America out.

ISTVAN BANYAI

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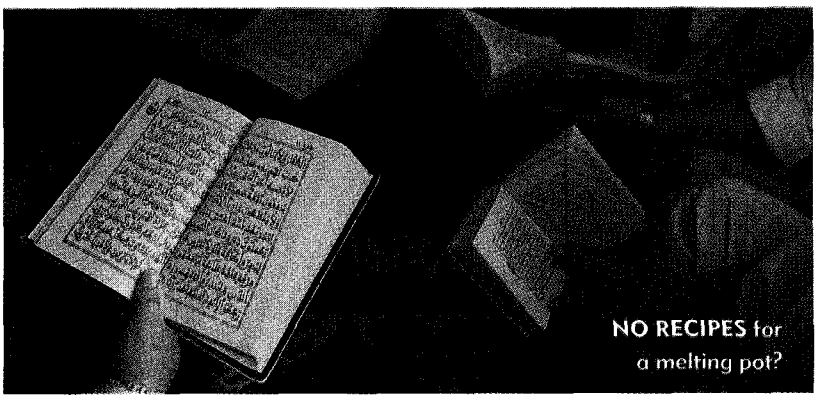
PRIMARY SOURCES

IMMIGRATION

The Islamic Edge

The usual measures of successful integration into a new society—the decline of segregated neighborhoods, a rise in levels of education and income—may not apply to Europe's Muslim immigrants, according to a new study from a German research center. Drawing on 1990s data from the United Kingdom's Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities, the report's authors find that religious identity has persisted more among Muslims in Britain than among other ethnic and religious minorities, and that Muslims have integrated more slowly. Neither education nor the amount of time spent in Britain appears to have weakened Islamic identity. The authors found no evidence that the formation of Islamic identity was strengthened in segregated neighborhoods; if anything, living in an *integrated* neighborhood appeared to reinforce a strong Islamic identity, as did higher incomes, better job qualifications, and mixed-work environments (defined as places where English is spoken). In other words, even if Muslim immigrants are well-educated, well-paid, and living and working among non-Muslims, the "intense and oppositional identities" that stoke Europe's current religious and cultural tensions may persist.



—*"Are Muslim Immigrants Different in Terms of Cultural Integration?" Alberto Bisin et al., Institute for the Study of Labor*

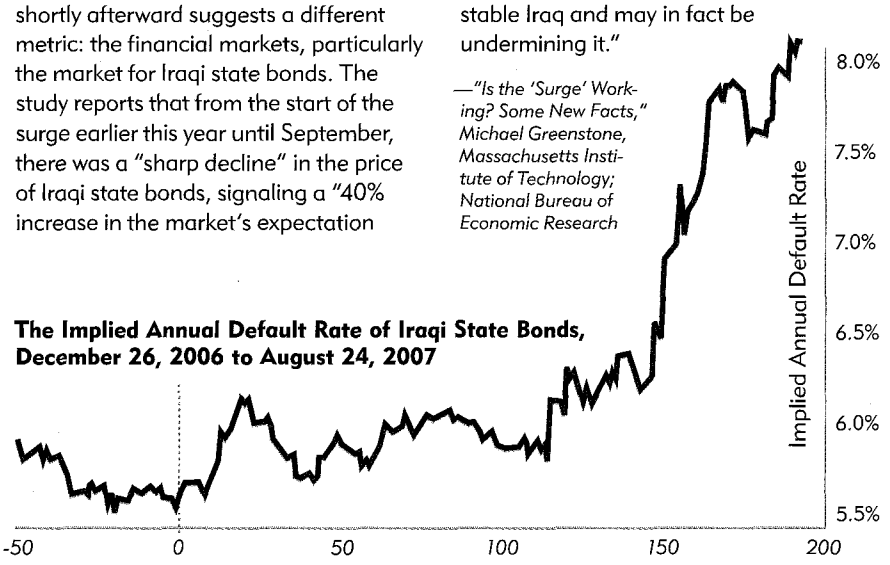
IRAQ

Surge-o-nomics

When General David Petraeus testified before Congress in September on the efficacy of the military surge in Iraq, his presentation included several charts purporting to show progress—fewer civilian deaths and "security incidents," and more seized weapons caches. But a report by an MIT economist released shortly afterward suggests a different metric: the financial markets, particularly the market for Iraqi state bonds. The study reports that from the start of the surge earlier this year until September, there was a "sharp decline" in the price of Iraqi state bonds, signaling a "40% increase in the market's expectation that Iraq will default" on its obligations. Since the bonds are sold on international markets (hedge funds hold a large portion), where the profit motive eliminates personal and political bias, the trajectory of bond prices may be the most accurate indicator available for assessing America's military strategy. And the data suggest that "the surge is failing to pave the way toward a stable Iraq and may in fact be undermining it."

—*"Is the 'Surge' Working? Some New Facts," Michael Greenstone, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; National Bureau of Economic Research*

The Implied Annual Default Rate of Iraqi State Bonds, December 26, 2006 to August 24, 2007



CULTURE

Do Gamers Dream of Electric Abs?

That little boy on the couch with his Nintendo may look unathletic, but inside he's thinking about building muscles—*big* muscles. Two researchers at the University of Illinois surveyed 181 boys (average age: 8.77) and found that young white males who read video-game magazines had an even stronger "desire for muscle mass" than those who read only sports or muscle-and-fitness magazines. Their desire to get pumped up may be explained by the exaggerated bulges—and powers—of video-game characters. This finding did not hold for young blacks, even though they tend to be more avid game players—perhaps, the authors speculate, because most heroes in the video-game magazines are white.

—*"Gaming Magazines and the Drive for Muscularity in Preadolescent Boys: A Longitudinal Examination," Kristen Harrison and Bradley J. Bond, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

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SOCIETY

Doubting the Dream

Americans doubt that they live in a land of equal economic opportunity, according to a new study from the Pew Research Center. It reports that Americans are nearly twice as likely as they were 20 years ago to describe the country as divided between haves and have-nots. This change is particularly significant, the authors argue, since Americans have traditionally "turned a deaf ear" to narratives of class warfare, seeing individuals—not society—as responsible for their economic fate. However, the new, bleaker view of the economic landscape is filtered through a partisan prism: 63 percent of Democrats see the country as split between haves and have-nots, compared with 33 percent of Republicans—by far the greatest divide between any of the subgroups studied and considerably larger than the one between upper-income and lower-income Americans (43 percent of respondents in the top third of household income perceive a have–have-not divide, versus 52 percent in the poorest third). Perceptions about personal finances have also changed for the worse: Only 43 percent of middle-income Americans now think they're among the haves, compared with 61 percent in 1988. But perception may tell us only so much: 19 percent of the wealthiest third of Americans see themselves as have-nots, suggesting that financial security is sometimes in the eye of the beholder.

—"A Nation of 'Haves' and 'Have-Nots'?" Jodie T. Allen and Michael Dimock, Pew Research Center

Is America divided into haves and have-nots?

	1988	2001	2007
Yes	26%	44%	48%
No	71%	53%	48%
Don't Know	3%	3%	4%

If you had to choose, are you in the ...

Haves	59%	52%	45%
Have-nots	17%	32%	34%
Don't Know	24%	16%	21%

EDUCATION

Separate and Superior

The self-segregation of historically black colleges and universities may seem antiquated, but a new study from two Virginia Tech researchers suggests that such institutions have been a path upward for disadvantaged black men. By comparing the first and the most-recent wages reported, the authors found that men who attended black colleges in the late '70s to early '80s—despite starting out lower on the socioeconomic ladder, on average, than black men at more-integrated schools—ultimately catch up. Over his career, a man who attended a black college could expect to earn 9 percent more than if he had attended a more integrated institution.

—"The Wage Earnings Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities," Bradford Mills and Elton Mykerezi, Southern Economic Journal

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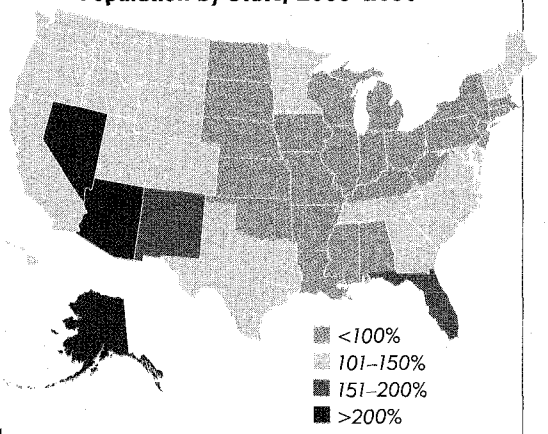
SOCIETY

The Oldster Boom

Projected Growth of Senior (Age 65+) Population by State, 2000–2030



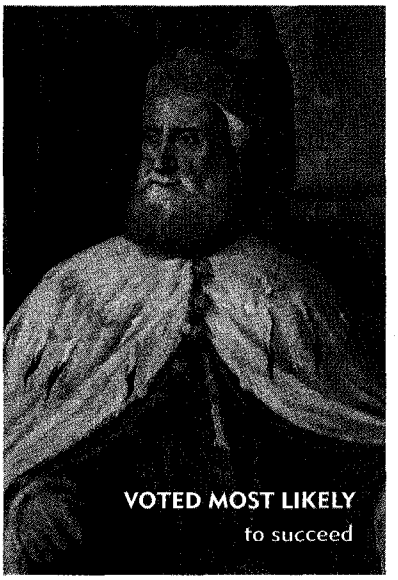
Yes, the looming "senior tsunami" of retiring Baby Boomers will swell the retiree population in Sun Belt states. But according to a new Brookings Institution report, many of the Boomers who'll be spending their golden years in warmer climes won't be migrating south when they turn 65; they're already there. The study focuses on what it calls "pre-seniors"—Americans aged 55 to 64, who represent the fastest-growing part of the Boomer population, particularly in the Southwest and the South Atlantic states, where they tend to be "aging in place," often retiring in the same suburbs where they've spent middle age. (In Georgia, for example, the report estimates that between 2010 and 2020 immigrating retirees will raise the state's senior population by just 3 percent, whereas the aging of existing residents will raise it by 40 percent.) Overall, pre-seniors are more educated and more racially and ethnically diverse than their Social Security–collecting predecessors, and more pre-senior women have worked. But pre-seniors are also plagued by higher rates of divorce and lower rates of marriage, leading the author to speculate that many of them will struggle financially as they reach retirement age.

—*"Mapping the Growth of Older America: Seniors and Boomers in the Early 21st Century," William Frey, Brookings Institution*

HISTORY

Why Venice Thrived

Old doges can teach modern political scientists new tricks, according to a paper by two computer scientists who analyzed the long and cumbersome—but ultimately very effective—means by which the Venetian Republic elected its sovereign-for-life. From 1268 to the fall of the republic, in 1797, Venice's council of oligarchs took 10 rounds to choose each doge, with the first nine rounds determining the electors for the next round and the final round picking a winner. Five of the first eight rounds were decided not by election but by the drawing of lots. This injection of randomness into the process, the authors argue, conferred considerable advantages over proportional-representation or simple-majority systems, and may explain the republic's great durability. The element of uncertainty forced electors to weigh minority opinions with special care; it also encouraged compromise and guarded against corruption. Moreover, by accepting an arduous selection process (which in the days before probability theory must have seemed highly arbitrary), Venice's oligarchs demonstrated to the people their collective commitment to the republic.



ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY

—*"Electing the Doge of Venice: Analysis of a Thirteenth-Century Protocol," Miranda Mowbray and Dieter Gollmann, IEEE Computer Security Foundations Symposium*

PSYCHOLOGY

How You Sleep Is Who You Are

Being a morning person or a night owl doesn't just determine when you start or end your workday; your internal clock may help define your psychology as well. A Spanish researcher found that our preference for engaging in activities earlier or later in the day shapes both our perceptions and our interactions. The author gave personality tests to 360 university students, whom he describes as a "proper sample," noting that the circadian rhythms of students "are not much under the influence of time schedules and social patterns." (Despite the occasional all-nighter, students presumably can follow their preferred sleep schedules more easily than working adults can.) His results offer new evidence that morning and evening types think differently. Early risers prefer to gather knowledge from concrete information. They reach conclusions through logic and analysis. Night owls are more imaginative and open to unconventional ideas, preferring the unknown and favoring intuitive leaps on their way to reaching conclusions. Social behavior diverges as well: Morning people are more likely to be self-controlled and exhibit "upstanding" conduct; they respect authority, are more formal, and take greater pains to make a good impression. (Earlier research also suggests that they are less likely to hold radical political opinions.) Evening people, by contrast, are "independent" and "nonconforming," and more reluctant to listen to authority—which suggests that teachers may have several reasons to prefer those students who wake up in time for class.

—*"Morning and Evening Types: Exploring Their Personality Styles," Juan Francisco Díaz-Morales,* Personality and Individual Differences

For links to the documents discussed in this section, visit www.theatlantic.com/doc/200712/primarysources.

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The Atlantic recently asked a group of foreign-policy authorities about the United States, al-Qaeda, and Pakistan.

Q: Should the United States unilaterally go after al-Qaeda leaders and training camps in Pakistan?

50% YES

"Obviously, we have to balance the need to eradicate the al-Qaeda leadership … against risks to the Musharraf government. But given what al-Qaeda has already done to the U.S., what it continues to do in Afghanistan and Iraq every day, and what it could do again directly against us, if we develop 'actionable intelligence,' we should strike."

"While it was a reasonable balancing of risks to give the Pakistanis the time and space to deal with the regrowth of al-Qaeda's base on their territory … it has become clear that they have neither the will or capability to do so … The time for a direct response is now."

"Only if there is actionable intelligence against individuals involved in operations against the United States and [if] the Pakistanis are unable or unwilling to act. It can't be ruled out, but it's counterproductive to explicitly rule it in. In some respects, it would be better for the terrorists to think that we won't act, since they will be less cautious."

"Even if such strikes strain relations with Pakistan, the United States cannot afford to let al-Qaeda regroup and strengthen."

50% NO

"Unless we can be—and how could we be?—100 percent sure of finding and capturing Osama bin Laden himself, the downside … of being seen to trample on Pakistani sovereignty and to attack and kill Muslims in a Muslim land would be immense, with no comparable gain."

"The likelihood that such operations would make a significant impact on al-Qaeda will remain far lower than the likelihood that such operations would weaken [Pervez] Musharraf even more and play into the hands of al-Qaeda."

"As much as I'd like to go get the bastards, I couldn't count on the intelligence being right."

"American unilateralism, especially when other people die, invariably comes with a heavy price tag."

Q: How likely is a U.S. incursion into the tribal areas in the next two years?

65% SOMEWHAT LIKELY

"And more so if the Musharraf government falls, leading to instability and/or a radical takeover."

"It would be very difficult for a president to say no to an attack if the intelligence community 'assured' him of the target. The president would fear being accused of not having the guts and missing an opportunity."

"As al-Qaeda gets stronger in Pakistan and as its leaders elevate their public profile in the shadow of Musharraf's troubles, the pressure on the administration to do 'something' will be high. It is possible that they will carry out some action to respond to domestic pressure during an election year."

"[But it is] more apt to be [a] covert operation with Pakistani coordination."

18% HIGHLY LIKELY

"Almost inevitable if a terrorist strike in the United States is persuasively shown to have been planned in the tribal areas. In that event, the pressure to intervene would be enormous, just as the pressure to intervene in Afghanistan was irresistible after 9/11."

"We are doing it already, just covertly."

17% HIGHLY UNLIKELY

"I would say it is possible, but not likely. What would make it likely is if the U.S. were attacked by a group using those areas as a base."

PARTICIPANTS (41): *Graham Allison, Ronald Asmus, Samuel Berger, Daniel Blumenthal, Stephen Bosworth, Daniel Byman, Warren Christopher, Wesley Clark, Ivo Daalder, Douglas Feith, Jay Garner, Leslie Gelb, Marc Grossman, John Hamre, Gary Hart, Bruce Hoffman, Laura Holgate, John Hulsman, Robert Hunter, Tony Judt, Robert Kagan, David Kay, Andrew Krepinevich, Charles Kupchan, John Lehman, James Lindsay, Edward Luttwak, John McLaughlin, William Nash, Joseph Nye, Carlos Pascual, Thomas Pickering, Paul Pillar, Kenneth Pollack, Joseph Ralston, Susan Rice, Wendy Sherman, Anne-Marie Slaughter, James Steinberg, Shibley Telhami, Anthony Zinni.*

Not all participants answered both questions.

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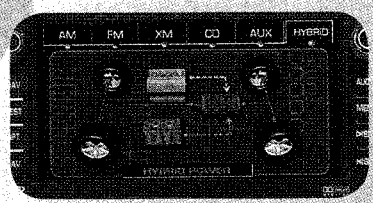

Visual readout on the navigation radio displays whatever power mode you are currently in: engine idle, engine power, hybrid power, regenerative braking, or battery power.

AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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THE WORLD IN NUMBERS

Slums are burgeoning worldwide—and that's a good thing.

Bright Lights, Big Cities

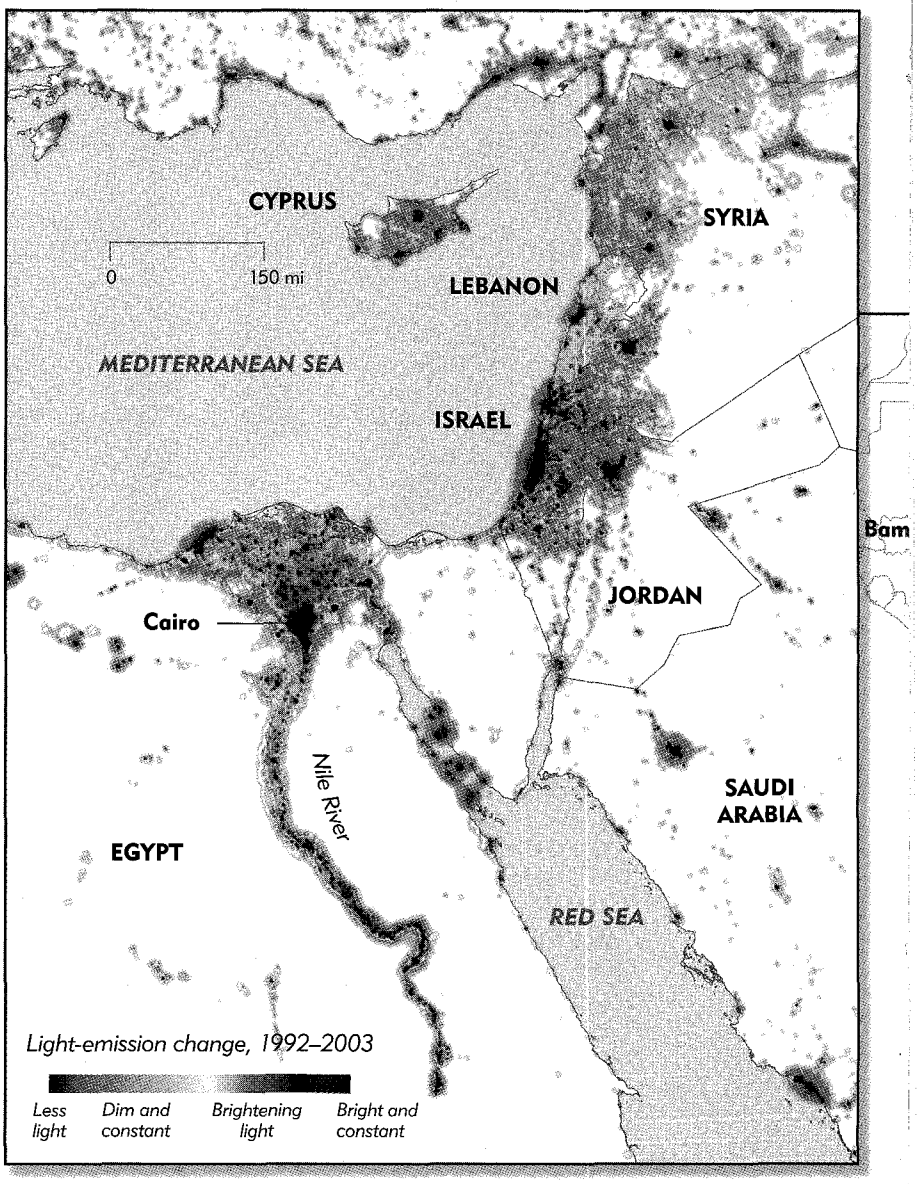
BY MATTHEW QUIRK

Sometime next year, most likely with the birth of a child in a small, booming city in Africa or Asia, people living in cities will outnumber those outside for the first time. There's a good chance, 1 in 3, that the child will be born in a slum.

Cities in the developing world are feeling the strain of all their new residents: According to the United Nations Population Fund, the cities of Africa and Asia will double in population between 2000 and 2030, and the poor will continue to flow into shantytowns. Worldwide, the number of slum dwellers has grown from 715 million in 1990 to roughly a billion today, and it's expected to hit 1.4 billion by 2020. When we think of typical poverty or a typical city, we should no longer imagine thirsty villagers or Chicago's skyscrapers, but a squatters' settlement.

Despite the often-squalid conditions, migrants keep streaming in for a reason. While urban poverty is more concentrated, more visible, and hence seemingly more desperate than the rural variety, migration into cities appears to reduce poverty in poor countries. In Brazil, for example, 66 percent of migrants to cities earn more money; the gains are highest for unskilled workers. According to the UN's "State of World Population 2007" report, since the 1990s, perhaps 10 percent of the poverty reduction achieved by developing countries has been the result of migration from the countryside. And since the beginning of the industrial age, the authors note, no country has grown rich before its people first shifted to cities.

Media coverage of cities in the developing world has focused mostly on the megacities—areas with 10 million or more residents. Some of these—like Lagos, Nigeria, and Dhaka, Bangladesh—continue to grow at a breakneck pace. But many of the world's urban giants—Buenos Aires, Kolkata, Mexico



The image above shows the intensifying nighttime glow, a sign of rapid urbanization, from 1992 to 2003 in the Nile Delta and on the Mediterranean coast of the Middle East. Spots that have been bright throughout the period are black; those that have been dim are cyan. Blue areas indicate diminishing light, and yellow areas new light. The map's most prominent colors, orange and red, show a substantial intensification of light.

Few places on Earth are more densely populated than the Palestinian territories. And the Nile is overflowing with people: In the past 30 years, Cairo has nearly doubled its population, to 12 million, its slums extending ever outward; tens of thousands of residents, at least, inhabit old crypts. The state has tried, with some success, to divert squatters to new cities built in the desert. Still, more than 90 percent of Egyptians live on the narrow arable strip along the Nile. It is rapidly being built over.

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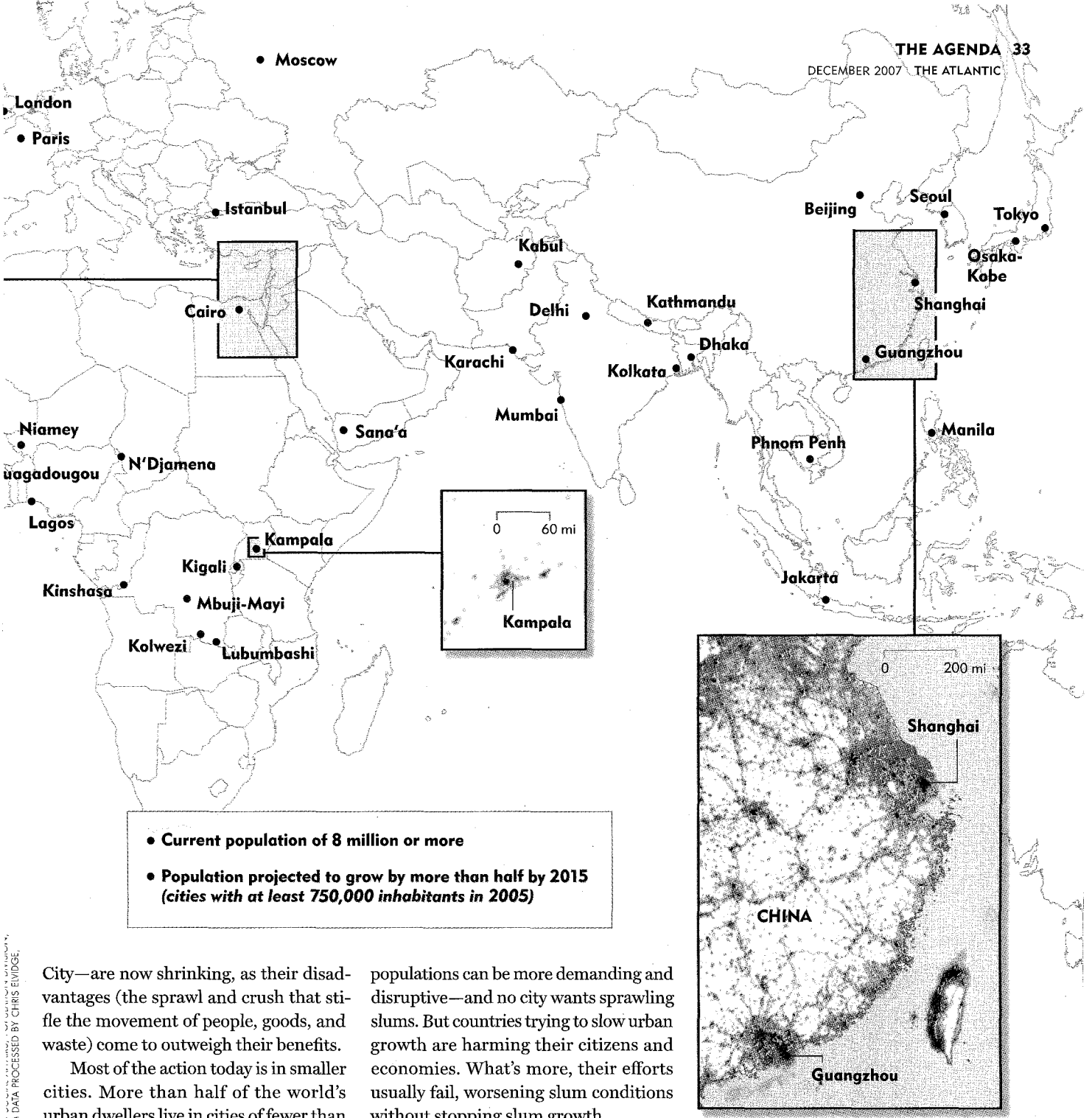

U.S. AIR FORCE DEFENSE METEOROLOGICAL SATELLITE PROGRAM DATA PROCESSED BY CHRIS ELVIDGE, NOAA-NESDIS-NGDC; GRAPHIC BY RYAN MORRIS

City—are now shrinking, as their disadvantages (the sprawl and crush that stifle the movement of people, goods, and waste) come to outweigh their benefits.

Most of the action today is in smaller cities. More than half of the world's urban dwellers live in cities of fewer than 500,000, and cities of 1 million to 5 million are growing the fastest. Advances in transportation and communication have made it easier to do business in these second-tier cities, and made it easier for such cities to flourish along with the global economy.

Poor countries often try to stop slum growth, evicting migrants and denying water and sanitation to new slum developments. There's a certain political logic to these strategies—concentrated populations can be more demanding and disruptive—and no city wants sprawling slums. But countries trying to slow urban growth are harming their citizens and economies. What's more, their efforts usually fail, worsening slum conditions without stopping slum growth.

The UN report suggests that governments would do better if they accepted the inevitability of new city dwellers and tried to work with them: Plan ahead, provide the basics—access to water, electricity, and roads—then get out of the way. Entrepreneurial hustle fills the slums; let the same drive that brings millions to the city improve it from the bottom up.

Countries serious about slowing the growth of their cities without trapping their citizens in poverty might try a method more effective than demolishing shantytowns. Over half of city growth now comes from natural increase—births less deaths—not from migration. (China, with its aging population and one-child-policy legacy, is a notable exception.) The best antidote to the ills of urban crowding, over the long term, might be a new emphasis on education, contraception, and women's rights.

Matthew Quirk is a staff editor at *The Atlantic*.

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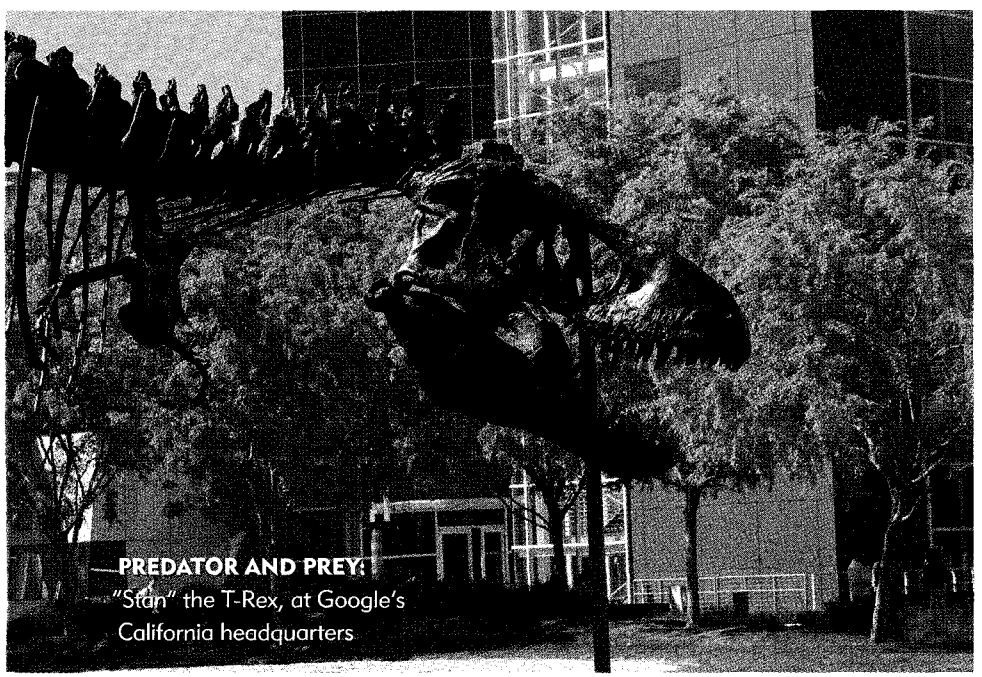
BUSINESS

Can Google "not be evil" and still fend off the government?

Google's Tar Pit

BY JOSHUA GREEN

The lawn outside Google's headquarters in Mountain View, California, is dominated by the imposing visage of "Stan"—tail thrashing, jaws agape, a full replica of the largest *Tyrannosaurus rex* fossil ever discovered. Stan mysteriously appeared on the lawn one morning several years ago, and is presumed by Google employees to have been a gift from the company's quirky founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin.



PREDATOR AND PREY: "Stan" the T-Rex, at Google's California headquarters

Like its corporate mascot, the search-engine giant has established itself at the top of the food chain, which helps explain why it has begun drawing scrutiny from Washington—much as Microsoft did when it was the hottest business of the 1990s. For now, interest is focusing on Google's proposed $3.1 billion acquisition of the online advertising firm DoubleClick, a deal the Federal Trade Commission delayed earlier this year over antitrust concerns. Any day now, the FTC is expected to decide whether the merger would create an entity that controlled so large a share of the online advertising market that it would be, in effect, a monopoly.

At the same time, many businesses overshadowed by Google have begun looking for political arguments that might slow its seemingly unstoppable ascent. "There is no company on the face of the planet that scares as many businesses as Google," says Blair Levin, a telecom and media analyst at the financial-services firm Stifel Nicolaus. The most popular and potentially effective argument against Google is the charge that it has become a monopoly that needs reining in. (The political power of this criticism is increased by fears that Google will misuse the vast amount of personal data it has accumulated.) In late September, Congress held the first antitrust hearings concerning Google—the opening salvo in what is likely to be one of the most important business and policy stories of the next few years.

The computer world is in the midst of its next great transition, as many applications and services—word processing, spreadsheets, e-mail, data storage—migrate from the personal computer to the Internet. Success for all sorts of businesses will soon depend on whether customers have easy and fast access to these Internet-based applications. Because gaining primacy will involve winning battles over regulation and federal oversight, companies like Microsoft and the major cable and telephone companies are now squaring off against Google in an arena where it has never competed and they have: Washington.

Until recently, a company's Washington strategy tended to evolve at the same pace as its business. As the company grew larger, it would add lobbyists and advisers to protect its interests. But as Microsoft grew more powerful in the 1990s, it mostly ignored politics. It had gotten to the top of the new economy without aid or interference from Washington—why change? Microsoft assumed the government posed no threat—until its competitors persuaded the Justice Department to launch an antitrust suit. Though the company avoided a breakup, its stock price stagnated for years.

Microsoft's example illustrates a problem that can plague any fast-growing tech company: You can control vast markets and terrify your competitors, but still be a Washington rookie. As the government focuses on Google, the city's familiar machinery is gearing up for battle on the question of whether the company is the large but benign force for innovation

LEI HAN

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its corporate slogan, "Don't be evil," suggests—or whether, like Stan, it's a carnivore on the loose.

Six years after settling its antitrust suit, Microsoft now spends around $9 million annually to maintain a powerful presence in the capital. Its example certainly shows that you ignore the government at your peril. But Google has achieved astounding success by doing things differently—by taking what it cloyingly calls a "Googley" approach to business. And it's now trying to take what one official described to me as a Googley approach to Washington: bringing the company's quirky style to a place that is a bastion of rules and traditions.

Google says it doesn't plan to follow the time-tested strategy of hiring lots of Washington lobbyists, the way rivals like AT&T and Verizon do. (Last year AT&T spent $23 million on lobbyists; Verizon $13 million. Google spent less than $1 million.) But it has lured presidential hopefuls, including John McCain and Hillary Clinton, to Mountain View: A tour of the "Googleplex" has become a campaign rite of passage. YouTube, a Google subsidiary, has sponsored presidential debates. In Washington, the company has been offering free classes to Hill staffers, ostensibly to familiarize them with the latest cool apps—but really to familiarize them with the company and to push back against the notion that it has become too big and too powerful.

The "try us, you'll like us" strategy at the heart of Google's self-image—the belief that familiarity will breed friends—has usually worked. But not always. A few applications, such as Google Earth, have generated alarm—some people were less than delighted when highly detailed photographs of their front yards began appearing online. And so far the strategy hasn't been very popular in Washington.

Earlier this year, Google failed to win legislation that would have ensured it could serve customers as quickly as its rivals, using media such as the cable lines and wireless spectrum those rivals control. The telecoms adopted a conventional strategy, buying expensive "issue ads" in Washington newspapers and on cable-television stations. Google chose a nontraditional route, creating ironic Web videos that aimed for viral appeal. The ads were clever, they were Googley, and they didn't do the job.

The company did win a partial victory on another big issue. In January, the government will auction off the block of wireless spectrum that will become available in 2009 when television broadcasters switch from analog to digital. Google lobbied the Federal Communications Commission to make the block freely available to any Internet-based application—the core of Google's future business. Instead, the FCC declared that only a portion would be open, leaving Google with the option of deciding if it will participate in the multibillion-dollar auction to buy the entire block or make do with access to just a portion of it.

Microsoft and the cable and phone companies are squaring off against Google in an arena where it has never competed: Washington.

But the battle it really needs to win—the one it has so far been unable to head off—is easing government antitrust concerns.

Google has yet to hit upon a strategy that combines the innovation it is known for with an appeal to the self-interest that is the currency of the capital's power brokers. One reason AT&T and Microsoft have succeeded in stoking antitrust interest against Google—quite ironic, given that both companies have been subject to large government antitrust actions—is that they're better versed in the fine points of lobbying. Both companies, for example, hold sway over many lawmakers by frequently reminding them how many employees live in their districts ("jobs" is a metric lawmakers respond to).

But the number of people who earn money advertising on Google is also impressive: a reputed 2 million to 3 million (Google won't provide the number), in small businesses and big corporations alike, spread across congressional districts throughout the country. If Google could learn to speak the language of Washington—jobs, small businesses, constituents—and harness these millions of entrepreneurs to support both its interests and theirs, it would be much closer to creating a strategy that is both Googley and effective.

In the meantime, the best thing Google has going for it is that even though it is by far the leading provider of online advertising, it has displayed none of the hyperaggressive attitude of Microsoft at a similar ascendant stage. But even a responsible company can grow into a monopoly, and Google's professed desire to "organize the world's information" suggests no lack of ambition, even if the company also professes that it will do no evil.

Just as Google has begun thinking creatively about Washington, the government has been thinking about Google. In his 2005 book, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, John Battelle notes that Microsoft's control of the PC's basic operating system in the 1990s made its system a virtual gateway to the Internet, and he posits that as the Internet continues to expand, the search function itself might become a similar gateway. The idea has found purchase among some government lawyers thinking about Google—and could suggest a Googley approach to antitrust law. As Google continues to grow, its greatest challenge may come not from Verizon, AT&T, or any of the other rivals plotting against it. As with Microsoft a decade ago, the challenge may come from the federal government.

Joshua Green is an Atlantic senior editor.

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MEDICINE

The health-care crisis no candidate is addressing?
Too many doctors

Overdose

BY SHANNON BROWNLEE

When we look back on the health-care plans of the 2008 campaign, we may wonder that no one chose to face up to one of the most troubling recent developments in American medicine. Yes, various presidential hopefuls have put forth plans containing detailed provisions to cover the uninsured, bring down costs, and improve the astonishingly uneven quality of health care. But no candidate has discussed the most dramatic change now under way in our medical system, a change that may negate many of the benefits of the plans on offer: the flood of new doctors coming down the pipeline.

BERND OBERMANN/CORBIS

Over the next eight years, medical schools are aiming to boost enrollment by as much as 30 percent above 2002 levels. More than a dozen new medical schools are being built or considered, and many of the nation's 125 existing schools are planning to expand—increasing the number of doctors minted each year from 16,000 to nearly 21,000. This expansion represents a stunning policy reversal by the Association of American Medical Colleges and the Council on Graduate Medical Education, which advises the federal government on how many residency positions to fund. Over the past 15 years, both organizations have raised concerns about the number of medical-school graduates, in the belief that having trained too many doctors in the 1970s and '80s, we would see a glut of physicians. Now the AAMC is warning that we'll be at least 100,000 doctors short by 2025 unless we hurry up and train more.

Behind the change of heart lies a cadre of economists and physicians who argue that demographic changes will make doctors scarce. First and foremost, they say, the population is expanding and the Baby Boomers are aging, resulting in more people to care for—especially more old and sick people. Doctors are aging too, and many are retiring. Add to that a decline in the number of hours physicians are willing to put in each day and a few incipient signs of a shortage (notably longer waiting times for appointments and rising salaries for young doctors), and the conclusion that we should expand the physician workforce seems like a no-brainer.

And it would be, if not for all the complications. Those incipient signs, many experts note, may suggest something other than a shortage, and the projections for the number of doctors we'll need aren't all that clear-cut. Some experts would even go so far as to suggest we need fewer doctors, not more. Elliott Fisher, a physician and researcher at the Center for Evaluative Clinical Sciences at Dartmouth Medical School, quipped at a recent gathering at the Institute of Medicine, "If we sent 30 percent of the doctors in this country to Africa, we might raise the level of health on both continents."

The physician workforce estimates rest on two critical assumptions, both of which are probably wrong.

The first is that the number of doctors practicing today is about right and that the market would send signals if supply were exceeding demand. This seems sensible enough, at least on the face of it. For most goods and services, after all, supply in any given community is limited by demand, a measure both of how much consumers need or want the product and of how able they are to pay for it. The number of car dealers in your town, for instance, depends on the number of people who want cars and can afford them.

The ability of patients to pay does help determine the number of doctors in any given community; physicians tend to congregate in places where incomes are higher and patients are more likely to be insured. (And to be sure, physicians are in short supply in parts of the country where relatively few people have health insurance, especially rural areas.) But the other component of demand—how much health care patients want or need—has far less influence over the supply of physicians. That's because for the most part it's your doctor and not you, the consumer, who determines how

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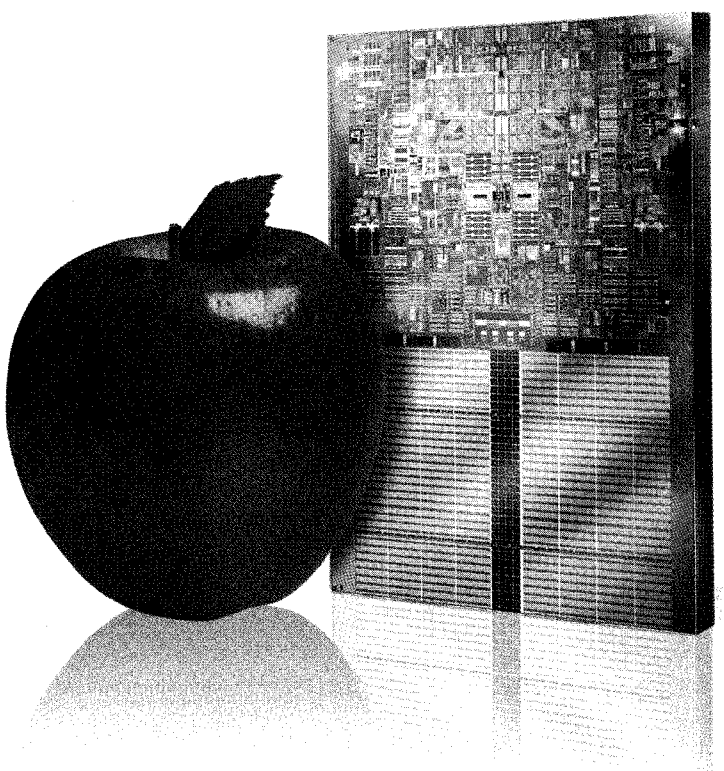

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much care you receive. When your doctor says you need a CT scan, you get one. When your doctor says you should go to the hospital, you go. Doctors, in effect, generate some of the demand for their services, so that even when there are large numbers of them per capita, they can keep their appointment books full. There is a growing consensus among health-care analysts that this perverse feature of medical economics is spurring a great deal of unnecessary care. And there's a corollary: New physicians won't necessarily go to (poor, rural) places that may need doctors. Many will go to affluent areas and places featuring a high "quality of life"—in other words, places already awash in physicians—where they'll generate even more demand.

employed on average two to three times as many doctors per patient as did hospitals at the low end. But these high-end hospitals did not produce better outcomes than hospitals using relatively few doctors, like the Mayo Clinic, Duke, and Stanford. Other studies show that these latter hospitals consistently deliver higher-quality care—and not just to dying patients—using fewer physicians. And the cost of care is much lower.

Why would more doctors lead to worse care, and fewer doctors to better care? More tests and procedures always entail more risk, and for care that's unnecessary, the ratio of benefit to risk is zero. What's more, where numerous doctors, particularly specialists, are routinely involved in a patient's case, the potential for miscommunication and confusion multiplies. Modern medicine should be a team sport, but it is often practiced as if everybody is running a different play. Different doctors order duplicative tests, prescribe drugs that interact poorly with what the patient is already taking, and assume another physician will attend to a critical aspect of a patient's care. A cardiologist can be a virtuoso at slipping a stent into the coronary artery of a patient in the throes of a heart attack, but if she leaves it to another physician to prescribe aspirin to her patient—one of the most effective treatments for preventing a second heart attack—that prescription might fall through the cracks.

> 'If we sent 30 percent of the doctors in this country to Africa, we might raise the level of health on both continents.'

The second assumption underlying the push to train more doctors is that an increase can only lead to better health, so that as long as the market can support new physicians financially, we should create more of them. This idea also rests on shaky ground. A wealth of data suggests that health care is actually no better (and if anything, worse) in parts of the country, like Manhattan and Los Angeles, where we have very high numbers of doctors and, in particular, very high numbers of specialists. In a paper published last year in the journal *Health Affairs*, David Goodman and his colleagues at Dartmouth's Center for the Evaluative Clinical Sciences examined care at academic medical centers—the hospitals that are associated with medical schools, considered the crème de la crème of American medicine. They tallied the number of doctors caring for Medicare recipients who were suffering from one or more chronic diseases and were in their last six months of life. The variation was enormous.

Medical centers at the high end, like UCLA and New York University Hospital,

This is what appears to be happening in many hospitals, where the ratio of specialists to primary-care physicians is especially high. In one recent study, two Harvard economists—Katherine Baicker, of the School of Public Health, and Amitabh Chandra, of the Kennedy School of Government—examined how the quality of care in different states varied as the proportion of specialists rose. They found that measures of quality, like the percentage of heart-attack patients who received a prescription for aspirin, tended to fall in direct proportion to a rising ratio of specialists. The point, says Chandra, "is not that the specialist is inferior, but that the system is not accounting for the 'coordination cost' specialists are imposing."

Medical schools are now graduating more and more specialists and fewer and fewer primary-care physicians. Between 1997 and 2005, the number of U.S. medical graduates entering family-practice residencies fell by 50 percent, as young doctors headed for more-lucrative specialties like orthopedic surgery and radiology. "The problem is, primary care has never been loved by the deans of medical schools or by the teaching hospitals," says Dartmouth's David Goodman. As the total number of doctors rises and the proportion of primary-care doctors falls, we're likely to see the quality of care deteriorate further and the cost of care increase rapidly.

The imbalance between specialists and primary-care physicians could be mitigated by changes in physician pay. Medicare, for instance, could raise its low reimbursement rates for primary-care visits (and lower its rates for specialist services), so that more young doctors would view primary care as an attractive career. Two primary-care professional organizations have proposed a plan to ensure that every patient has a primary-care physician, who is paid extra to coordinate the patient's various doctors. In the meantime, patients might want to pay attention to the mix of doctors at their local hospital and compare how the quality of care measures up.

As for the rising number of physicians being trained, the remedy is simple: Turn the spigot back off, or at least close it partway. The groups now calling for more physicians should come up with better evidence that all those new doctors are not going to simply drive up costs.

Shannon Brownlee is the author of *Overtreated: Why Too Much Medicine Is Making Us Sicker and Poorer* (2007).

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Will Money Solve Africa's Development Problems?

Yes.

But only if the money comes as investment. Africa doesn't need aid from governments and international agencies. Over the last 40 years, aid to developing

countries has reached $2.6 trillion, 25% of which has gone to sub-Saharan Africa. It has notably failed to eliminate poverty. Philanthropy should have only a limited role—for disaster relief—and helping policy makers promote good governance, the rule of law, and property rights. What Africa needs in order to overcome its problems is the same as that of any other region or country: flourishing enterprises that provide employment and create wealth.

This is true even in my field—education. Less than 60% of the adult population of sub-Saharan Africa can read and write with understanding. And for every 100 men, only 76 women are literate…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Professor James Tooley is president, The Education Fund, Orient Global.

No Way.

The problem in Africa has never been lack of money, but rather the inability to exploit the African mind. Picture a banana farmer in a rural African village with a leaking roof that would cost $100 to fix. If one purchased $100 worth of his bananas, the farmer would have the power and choice to determine whether the leaking roof is his top spending priority. On the other hand, if he is given $100 as a grant or loan to fix the roof, his choice would be limited to what the owner of the big money views as a priority. Out of 960 million Africans in 53 states, there are innovators and entrepreneurs who, if rewarded by the market, will address the challenges facing the continent.

If money was the key to solving problems, banks would send agents

on the streets to supply money to afflicted individuals. But banks only offer money to individuals who successfully translate their problems into opportunities. Money in itself is neutral…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

James Shikwati is the founder and director of the Inter Region Economic Network and CEO of The African Executive *business magazine.*

I Thought So…

But now I don't. There is that threadbare maxim: If you hold a hammer in your hand, every problem looks like a nail. What happens, then, when all we hold in our hand is a checkbook?

Checkbook Development suggests that poor nations cannot build the skills necessary to solve their own problems. There is, however, a notable exception.

The President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, called me to his office to

assist him to build private sector capacity and improve export competitiveness. I informed him that it would not be possible for the amount of money and time he budgeted to do my job and train Rwandans at the same time. He told me the story of when he had finally accumulated enough money to provide back pay for his troops who were fighting to end the genocide. He asked them if he could use the money, instead, to purchase helicopters to help end the war sooner. Not a single soldier objected…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Michael Fairbanks is the co-founder of OTF Group, and the SEVEN FUND, which provides grants for Enterprise Solutions to Poverty.

Yes.

If it is invested in enhancing African capabilities to integrate the continent into global networks of knowledge and creating prosperity and stability. This will mean confronting and overcoming a triple failure:

corruption and abuse of power by African governments, predatory practices by extractive industries, and the waste of resources by an uncoordinated and ineffective aid system.

Africa will acquire a strong voice when it is represented by credible leaders and managers. Such people cannot be produced without investment in the appropriate institutions. Currently, about $5 billion per annum is provided in the form of technical assistance to meet donor requirements. Directing a significant portion of this money toward investment in institutions will produce stakeholders focused on creating a positive change…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Ashraf Ghani is Chairman of the Institute for State Effectiveness. He was adviser to the UN for the construction of the Bonn Agreement for Afghanistan, and was finance minister of Afghanistan from 2002–2004.

No.

In fact, after fifty years of trying and $600 billion worth of aid-giving, with close to zero rise in living standards in Africa, I can make the case for "No" pretty decisively. Aid advocates talk about cheap solutions like the 10-cent oral rehydration salts that would save a baby dying from diarrheal diseases, the 12-cent

malaria medicine that saves someone dying from malaria, or the $5 bed nets that keep them from getting malaria in the first place. Yet despite the aid money flowing, two million babies still died from diarrheal diseases last year, more than a million still died from malaria, and most potential malaria victims are still not sleeping under bed nets…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

William Easterly is professor of economics at New York University, joint with Africa House, and co-director of NYU's Development Research Institute.

To read these essays in their entirety, and to learn more about the authors, visit www.templeton.org/africa

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Is Iraq Vietnam?
Who really won in 2000?
Which side are you on in the culture wars?
These questions have divided the Baby Boomers and distorted our politics. One candidate could transcend them.

BY ANDREW SULLIVAN

Illustration by John Ritter

Goodbye to All That

The logic behind the candidacy of Barack Obama is not, in the end, about Barack Obama. It has little to do with his policy proposals, which are very close to his Democratic rivals' and which, with a few exceptions, exist firmly within the conventions of our politics. It has little to do with Obama's considerable skills as a conciliator, legislator, or even thinker. It has even less to do with his ideological pedigree or legal background or rhetorical skills. Yes, as the many profiles prove, he has considerable intelligence and not a little guile. But so do others, not least his formidably polished and practiced opponent Senator Hillary Clinton. ¶ Obama, moreover, is no saint. He has flaws and tics: Often tired, sometimes crabby, intermittently solipsistic, he's a surprisingly uneven campaigner. »

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For an interview with Andrew Sullivan about this article and for excerpts from his conversation with Barack Obama, visit www.theatlantic.com/obama.

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A soaring rhetorical flourish one day is undercut by a lackluster debate performance the next. He is certainly not without self-regard. He has more experience in public life than his opponents want to acknowledge, but he has not spent much time in Washington and has never run a business. His lean physique, close-cropped hair, and stick-out ears can give the impression of a slightly pushy undergraduate. You can see why many of his friends and admirers have urged him to wait his turn. He could be president in five or nine years' time—why the rush?

But he knows, and privately acknowledges, that the fundamental point of his candidacy is that it is happening now. In politics, timing matters. And the most persuasive case for Obama has less to do with him than with the moment he is meeting. The moment has been a long time coming, and it is the result of a confluence of events, from one traumatizing war in Southeast Asia to another in the most fractious country in the Middle East. The legacy is a cultural climate that stultifies our politics and corrupts our discourse.

Obama's candidacy in this sense is a potentially transformational one. Unlike any of the other candidates, he could take America—finally—past the debilitating, self-perpetuating family quarrel of the Baby Boom generation that has long engulfed all of us. So much has happened in America in the past seven years, let alone the past 40, that we can be forgiven for focusing on the present and the immediate future. But it is only when you take several large steps back into the long past that the full logic of an Obama presidency stares directly—and uncomfortably—at you.

At its best, the Obama candidacy is about ending a war—not so much the war in Iraq, which now has a momentum that will propel the occupation into the next decade—but the war within America that has prevailed since Vietnam and that shows dangerous signs of intensifying, a nonviolent civil war that has crippled America at the very time the world needs it most. It is a war about war—and about culture and about religion and about race. And in that war, Obama—and Obama alone—offers the possibility of a truce.

The traces of our long journey to this juncture can be found all around us. Its most obvious manifestation is political rhetoric. The high temperature—Bill O'Reilly's nightly screeds against anti-Americans on one channel, Keith Olbermann's "Worst Person in the World" on the other; MoveOn.org's "General Betray Us" on the one side, Ann Coulter's *Treason* on the other; Michael Moore's accusation of treason at the core of the Iraq War, Sean Hannity's assertion of treason in the opposition to it—is particularly striking when you examine the generally minor policy choices on the table. Something deeper and more powerful than the actual decisions we face is driving the tone of the debate.

Take the biggest foreign-policy question—the war in Iraq. The rhetoric ranges from John McCain's "No Surrender" banner to the "End the War Now" absolutism of much of the Democratic base. Yet the substantive issue is almost comically removed from this hyperventilation. Every potential president, Republican or Democrat, would likely inherit more than 100,000 occupying troops in January 2009; every one would be attempting to redeploy them as prudently as possible and to build stronger alliances both in the region and in the world. Every major candidate, moreover, will pledge to use targeted military force against al-Qaeda if necessary; every one is committed to ensuring that Iran will not have a nuclear bomb; every one is committed to an open-ended deployment in Afghanistan and an unbending alliance with Israel. We are fighting over something, to be sure. But it is more a fight over how we define ourselves and over long-term goals than over what is practically to be done on the ground.

On domestic policy, the primary issue is health care. Again, the ferocious rhetoric belies the mundane reality. Between the boogeyman of "Big Government" and the alleged threat of the drug companies, the practical differences are more matters of nuance than ideology. Yes, there are policy disagreements, but in the wake of the Bush administration, they are underwhelming. Most Republicans support continuing the Medicare drug benefit for seniors, the largest expansion of the entitlement state since Lyndon Johnson, while Democrats are merely favoring more cost controls on drug and insurance companies. Between Mitt Romney's Massachusetts plan—individual mandates, private-sector leadership—and Senator Clinton's triangulated update of her 1994 debacle, the difference is more technical than fundamental. The country has moved ever so slightly leftward. But this again is less a function of ideological transformation than of the current system's failure to provide affordable health care for the insured or any care at all for growing numbers of the working poor.

Even on issues that are seen as integral to the polarization, the practical stakes in this election are minor. A large consensus in America favors legal abortions during the first trimester and varying restrictions thereafter. Even in solidly red states, such as South Dakota, the support for total criminalization is weak. If *Roe* were to fall, the primary impact would be the end of a system more liberal than any in Europe in favor of one more in sync with the varied views that exist across this country. On marriage, the battles in the states are subsiding, as a bevy of blue states adopt either civil marriage or civil unions for gay couples, and the rest stand pat. Most states that want no recognition for same-sex couples have already made that decision, usually through state constitutional amendments that allow change only with extreme difficulty. And the one state where marriage equality exists, Massachusetts, has decided to maintain the reform indefinitely.

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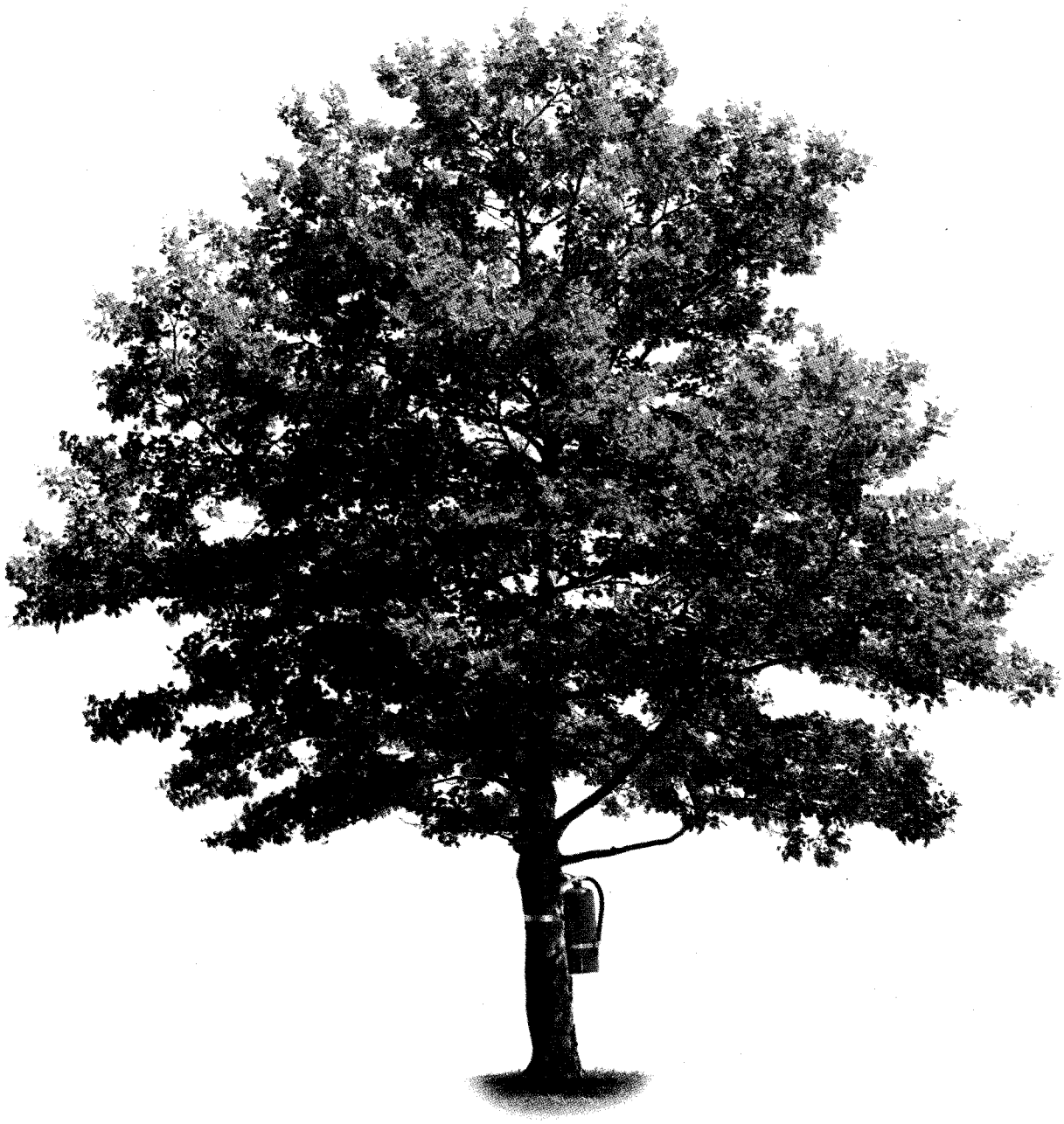

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Given this quiet, evolving consensus on policy, how do we account for the bitter, brutal tone of American politics? The answer lies mainly with the biggest and most influential generation in America: the Baby Boomers. The divide is still—amazingly—between those who fought in Vietnam and those who didn't, and between those who fought and dissented and those who fought but never dissented at all. By defining the contours of the Boomer generation, it lasted decades. And with time came a strange intensity.

The professionalization of the battle, and the emergence of an array of well-funded interest groups dedicated to continuing it, can be traced most proximately to the bitter confirmation fights over Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas, in 1987 and 1991 respectively. The presidency of Bill Clinton, who was elected with only 43 percent of the vote in 1992, crystallized the new reality. As soon as the Baby Boomers hit the commanding heights, the Vietnam power struggle rebooted. The facts mattered little in the face of such a divide. While Clinton was substantively a moderate conservative in policy, his countercultural origins led to the drama, ultimately, of religious warfare and even impeachment. Clinton clearly tried to bridge the Boomer split. But he was trapped on one side of it—and his personal foibles only reignited his generation's agonies over sex and love and marriage. Even the failed impeachment didn't bring the two sides to their senses, and the election of 2000 only made matters worse: Gore and Bush were almost designed to reflect the Boomers' and the country's divide, which deepened further.

The trauma of 9/11 has tended to obscure the memory of that unprecedentedly bitter election, and its nail-biting aftermath, which verged on a constitutional crisis. But its legacy is very much still with us, made far worse by President Bush's approach to dealing with it. Despite losing the popular vote, Bush governed as if he had won Reagan's 49 states. Instead of cementing a coalition of the center-right, Bush and Rove set out to ensure that the new evangelical base of the Republicans would turn out more reliably in 2004. Instead of seeing the post-'60s divide as a wound to be healed, they poured acid on it.

With 9/11, Bush had a reset moment—a chance to reunite the country in a way that would marginalize the extreme haters on both sides and forge a national consensus. He chose not to do so. It wasn't entirely his fault. On the left, the truest believers were unprepared to give the president the benefit of any doubt in the wake of the 2000 election, and they even judged the 9/11 attacks to be a legitimate response to decades of U.S. foreign policy. Some could not support the war in Afghanistan, let alone the adventure in Iraq. As the Iraq War faltered, the polarization intensified. In 2004, the Vietnam argument returned with a new energy, with the Swift Boat attacks on John Kerry's Vietnam War record and CBS's misbegotten report on Bush's record in the Texas Air National Guard. These were the stories that touched the collective nerve of the political classes—because they parsed once again along the fault lines of the Boomer divide that had come to define all of us.

The result was an even deeper schism. Kerry was arguably the worst candidate on earth to put to rest the post-1960s culture war—and his decision to embrace his Vietnam identity at the convention made things worse. Bush, for his part, was unable to do nuance. And so the campaign became a matter of symbolism—pitting those who took the terror threat "seriously" against those who didn't. Supporters of the Iraq War became more invested in asserting the morality of their cause than in examining the effectiveness of their tactics. Opponents of the war found themselves dispirited. Some were left to hope privately for American failure; others lashed out, as distrust turned to paranoia. It was and is a toxic cycle, in which the interests of the United States are supplanted by domestic agendas born of pride and ruthlessness on the one hand and bitterness and alienation on the other.

This is the critical context for the election of 2008. It is an election that holds the potential not merely to intensify this cycle of division but to bequeath it to a new generation, one marked by a new war that need not be—that should not be—seen as another Vietnam. A Giuliani-Clinton matchup, favored by the media elite, is a classic intragenerational struggle—with two deeply divisive and ruthless personalities ready to go to the brink. Giuliani represents that Nixonian disgust with anyone asking questions about, let alone actively protesting, a war. Clinton will always be, in the minds of so many, the young woman who gave the commencement address at Wellesley, who sat in on the Nixon implosion and who once disdained baking cookies. For some, her husband will always be the draft dodger who smoked pot and wouldn't admit it. And however hard she tries, there is nothing Hillary Clinton can do about it. She and Giuliani are conscripts in their generation's war. To their respective sides, they are war heroes.

In normal times, such division is not fatal, and can even be healthy. It's great copy for journalists. But we are not talking about routine rancor. And we are not talking about normal times. We are talking about a world in which Islamist terror, combined with increasingly available destructive technology, has already murdered thousands of Americans, and tens of thousands of Muslims, and could pose an existential danger to the West. The terrible failures of the Iraq occupation, the resurgence of al-Qaeda in Pakistan, the progress of Iran toward nuclear capability, and the collapse of America's prestige and moral reputation, especially among those millions of

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Muslims too young to have known any American president but Bush, heighten the stakes dramatically.

Perhaps the underlying risk is best illustrated by our asking what the popular response would be to another 9/11–style attack. It is hard to imagine a reprise of the sudden unity and solidarity in the days after 9/11, or an outpouring of support from allies and neighbors. It is far easier to imagine an even more bitter fight over who was responsible (apart from the perpetrators) and a profound suspicion of a government forced to impose more restrictions on travel, communications, and civil liberties. The current president would be unable to command the trust, let alone the support, of half the country in such a time. He could even be blamed for provoking any attack that came.

Of the viable national candidates, only Obama and possibly McCain have the potential to bridge this widening partisan gulf. Polling reveals Obama to be the favored Democrat among Republicans. McCain's bipartisan appeal has receded in recent years, especially with his enthusiastic embrace of the latest phase of the Iraq War. And his inherent weaknesses in Iraq, and its profound limitations in winning a long war against radical Islam. The next president has to create a sophisticated and supple blend of soft and hard power to isolate the enemy, to fight where necessary, but also to create an ideological template that works to the West's advantage over the long haul. There is simply no other candidate with the potential of Obama to do this. Which is where his face comes in.

Consider this hypothetical. It's November 2008. A young Pakistani Muslim is watching television and sees that this man—Barack Hussein Obama—is the new face of America. In one simple image, America's soft power has been ratcheted up not a notch, but a logarithm. A brown-skinned man whose father was an African, who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii, who attended a majority-Muslim school as a boy, is now the alleged enemy. If you wanted the crudest but most effective weapon against the demonization of America that fuels Islamist ideology, Obama's face gets close. It proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can.

Obama is the only candidate who can take America—finally—past the debilitating, self-perpetuating family quarrel of the Baby Boom generation.

personal history can only reinforce the Vietnam divide. But Obama's reach outside his own ranks remains striking. Why? It's a good question: How has a black, urban liberal gained far stronger support among Republicans than the made-over moderate Clinton or the southern charmer Edwards? Perhaps because the Republicans and independents who are open to an Obama candidacy see his primary advantage in prosecuting the war on Islamist terrorism. It isn't about his policies as such; it is about his person. They are prepared to set their own ideological preferences to one side in favor of what Obama offers America in a critical moment in our dealings with the rest of the world. The war today matters enormously. The war of the last generation? Not so much. If you are an American who yearns to finally get beyond the symbolic battles of the Boomer generation and face today's actual problems, Obama may be your man.

What does he offer? First and foremost: his face. Think of it as the most effective potential re-branding of the United States since Reagan. Such a re-branding is not trivial—it's central to an effective war strategy. The war on Islamist terror, after all, is two-pronged: a function of both hard power and soft power. We have seen the potential of hard power in removing the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. We have also seen its

The other obvious advantage that Obama has in facing the world and our enemies is his record on the Iraq War. He is the only major candidate to have clearly opposed it from the start. Whoever is in office in January 2009 will be tasked with redeploying forces in and out of Iraq, negotiating with neighboring states, engaging America's estranged allies, tamping down regional violence. Obama's interlocutors in Iraq and the Middle East would know that he never had suspicious motives toward Iraq, has no interest in occupying it indefinitely, and foresaw more clearly than most Americans the baleful consequences of long-term occupation.

This latter point is the most salient. The act of picking the next president will be in some ways a statement of America's view of Iraq. Clinton is running as a centrist Democrat—voting for war, accepting the need for an occupation at least through her first term, while attempting to do triage as practically as possible. Obama is running as the clearer antiwar candidate. At the same time, Obama's candidacy cannot fairly be cast as a McGovernite revival in tone or substance. He is not opposed to war as such. He is not opposed to the use of unilateral force, either—as demonstrated by his willingness to target al-Qaeda in Pakistan over the objections of the Pakistani government. He does not oppose the idea of democratization in the Muslim world as a general principle or the concept of nation

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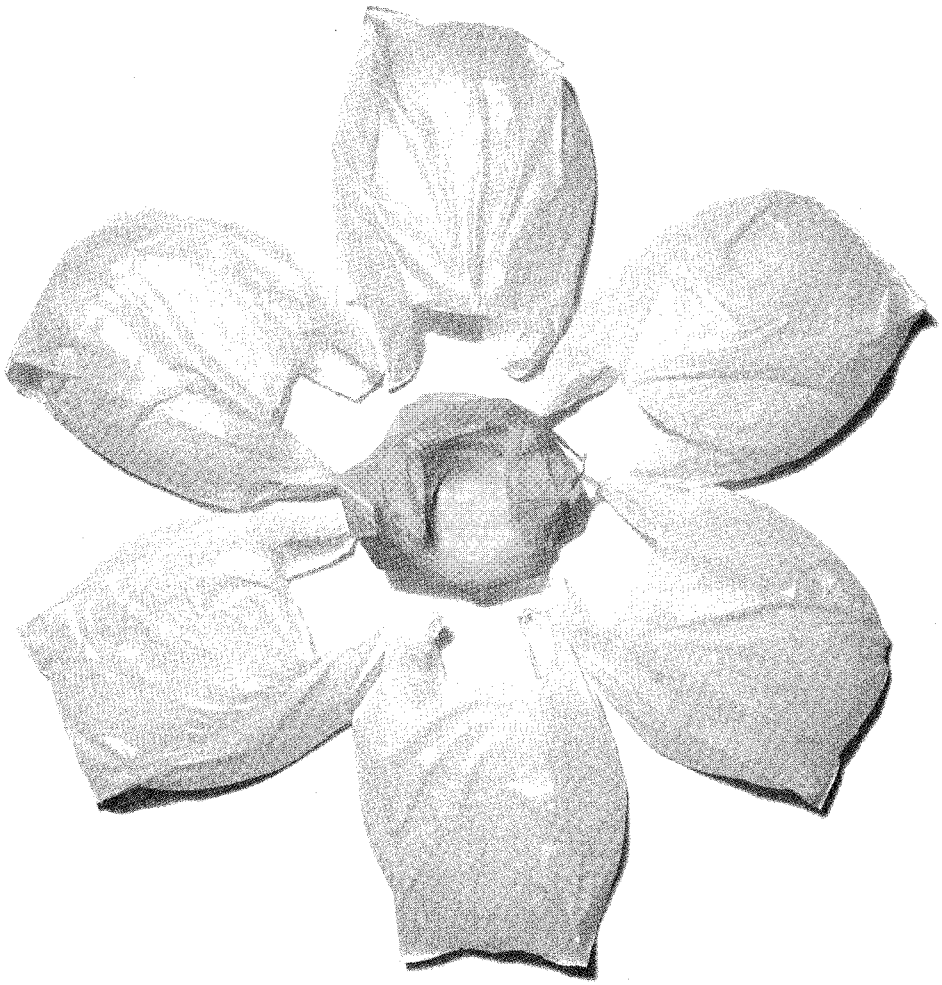

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building as such. He is not an isolationist, as his support for the campaign in Afghanistan proves. It is worth recalling the key passages of the speech Obama gave in Chicago on October 2, 2002, five months before the war:

> I don't oppose all wars. And I know that in this crowd today, there is no shortage of patriots, or of patriotism. What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war ... I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda. I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars.

The man who opposed the war for the right reasons is for that reason the potential president with the most flexibility in dealing with it. Clinton is hemmed in by her past objectives. And so the less-adept ones seem deceptive, and the more-practiced ones, like Clinton, exhibit the plasticness and inauthenticity that still plague her candidacy. She's hiding her true feelings. We know it, she knows we know it, and there is no way out of it.

Obama, simply by virtue of when he was born, is free of this defensiveness. Strictly speaking, he is at the tail end of the Boomer generation. But he is not of it.

"Partly because my mother, you know, was smack-dab in the middle of the Baby Boom generation," he told me. "She was only 18 when she had me. So when I think of Baby Boomers, I think of my mother's generation. And you know, I was too young for the formative period of the '60s—civil rights, sexual revolution, Vietnam War. Those all sort of passed me by."

Obama's mother was, in fact, born only five years earlier than Hillary Clinton. He did not politically come of age during the Vietnam era, and he is simply less afraid of the right wing than Clinton is, because he has emerged on the national stage during a period of conservative decadence and decline. And so, for example, he felt much freer than Clinton to say he was prepared to meet and

'When I think of Baby Boomers, I think of my mother's generation. And I was too young for the formative period of the '60s—civil rights, sexual revolution, Vietnam War. Those all sort of passed me by.'

and her generation. If she pulls out too quickly, she will fall prey to the usual browbeating from the right—the same theme that has played relentlessly since 1968. If she stays in too long, the antiwar base of her own party, already suspicious of her, will pounce. The Boomer legacy imprisons her—and so it may continue to imprison us. The debate about the war in the next four years needs to be about the practical and difficult choices ahead of us—not about the symbolism or whether it's a second Vietnam.

A generational divide also separates Clinton and Obama with respect to domestic politics. Clinton grew up saturated in the conflict that still defines American politics. As a liberal, she has spent years in a defensive crouch against triumphant post-Reagan conservatism. The maumauing that greeted her health-care plan and the endless nightmares of her husband's scandals drove her deeper into her political bunker. Her liberalism is warped by what you might call a Political Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Reagan spooked people on the left, especially those, like Clinton, who were interested primarily in winning power. She has internalized what most Democrats of her generation have internalized: They suspect that the majority is not with them, and so some quotient of discretion, fear, or plain deception is required if they are to advance their hold talks with hostile world leaders in his first year in office. He has proposed sweeping middle-class tax cuts and opposed drastic reforms of Social Security, without being tarred as a fiscally reckless liberal. (Of course, such accusations are hard to make after the fiscal performance of today's "conservatives.") Even his more conservative positions—like his openness to bombing Pakistan, or his support for merit pay for public-school teachers—do not appear to emerge from a desire or need to credentialize himself with the right. He is among the first Democrats in a generation not to be afraid or ashamed of what they actually believe, which also gives them more freedom to move pragmatically to the right, if necessary. He does not smell, as Clinton does, of political fear.

There are few areas where this Democratic fear is more intense than religion. The crude exploitation of sectarian loyalty and religious zeal by Bush and Rove succeeded in deepening the culture war, to Republican advantage. Again, this played into the divide of the Boomer years—between God-fearing Americans and the peacenik atheist hippies of lore. The Democrats have responded by pretending to a public religiosity that still seems strained. Listening to Hillary Clinton detail her prayer life in public, as she did last spring to a packed house at George Washington University,

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was at once poignant and repellent. Poignant because her faith may well be genuine; repellent because its Methodist genuineness demands that she not profess it so tackily. But she did. The polls told her to.

Obama, in contrast, opened his soul up in public long before any focus group demanded it. His first book, *Dreams From My Father*, is a candid, haunting, and supple piece of writing. It was not concocted to solve a political problem (his second, hackneyed book, *The Audacity of Hope*, filled that niche). It was a genuine display of internal doubt and conflict and sadness. And it reveals Obama as someone whose "complex fate," to use Ralph Ellison's term, is to be both believer and doubter, in a world where such complexity is as beleaguered as it is necessary.

This struggle to embrace modernity without abandoning faith falls on one of the fault lines in the modern world. It is arguably the critical fault line, the tectonic rift that is advancing the bloody borders of Islam and the increasingly sectarian boundaries of American politics. As humankind abandons the secular totalitarianisms of the last century and grapples with breakneck technological and scientific discoveries, the appeal of absolutist faith is powerful in both developing and developed countries. It is the latest in a long line of rebukes to liberal modernity—but this rebuke has the deepest roots, the widest appeal, and the attraction that all total solutions to the human predicament proffer. From the doctrinal absolutism of Pope Benedict's Vatican to the revival of fundamentalist Protestantism in the U.S. and Asia to the attraction for many Muslims of the most extreme and antimodern forms of Islam, the same phenomenon has spread to every culture and place.

You cannot confront the complex challenges of domestic or foreign policy today unless you understand this gulf and its seriousness. You cannot lead the United States without having a foot in both the religious and secular camps. This, surely, is where Bush has failed most profoundly. By aligning himself with the most extreme and basic of religious orientations, he has lost many moderate believers and alienated the secular and agnostic in the West. If you cannot bring the agnostics along in a campaign against religious terrorism, you have a problem.

Here again, Obama, by virtue of generation and accident, bridges this deepening divide. He was brought up in a nonreligious home and converted to Christianity as an adult. But—critically—he is not born-again. His faith—at once real and measured, hot and cool—lives at the center of the American religious experience. It is a modern, intellectual Christianity. "I didn't have an epiphany," he explained to me. "What I really did was to take a set of values and ideals that were first instilled in me from my mother, who was, as I have called her in my book, the last of the secular humanists—you know, belief in kindness and empathy and discipline, responsibility—those kinds of values. And I found in the Church a vessel or a repository for those values and a way to connect those values to a larger community and a belief in God and a belief in redemption and mercy and justice ... I guess the point is, it continues to be both a spiritual, but also intellectual, journey for me, this issue of faith."

The best speech Obama has ever given was not his famous 2004 convention address, but a June 2007 speech in Connecticut. In it, he described his religious conversion:

> One Sunday, I put on one of the few clean jackets I had, and went over to Trinity United Church of Christ on 95th Street on the South Side of Chicago. And I heard Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright deliver a sermon called "The Audacity of Hope." And during the course of that sermon, he introduced me to someone named Jesus Christ. I learned that my sins could be redeemed. I learned that those things I was too weak to accomplish myself, he would accomplish with me if I placed my trust in him. And in time, I came to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world and in my own life.
>
> It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity one day and affirm my Christian faith. It came about as a choice and not an epiphany. I didn't fall out in church, as folks sometimes do. The questions I had didn't magically disappear. The skeptical bent of my mind didn't suddenly vanish. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side, I felt I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to his will, and dedicated myself to discovering his truth and carrying out his works.

To be able to express this kind of religious conviction without disturbing or alienating the growing phalanx of secular voters, especially on the left, is quite an achievement. As he said in 2006, "Faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts." To deploy the rhetoric of Evangelicalism while eschewing its occasional anti-intellectualism and hubristic certainty is as rare as it is exhilarating. It is both an intellectual achievement, because Obama has clearly attempted to wrestle a modern Christianity from the encumbrances and anachronisms of its past, and an American achievement, because it was forged in the only American institution where conservative theology and the Democratic Party still communicate: the black church.

And this, of course, is the other element that makes Obama a potentially transformative candidate: race. Here, Obama again finds himself in the center of a complex fate, unwilling to pick sides in a divide that reaches back centuries and appears at times unbridgeable. His appeal

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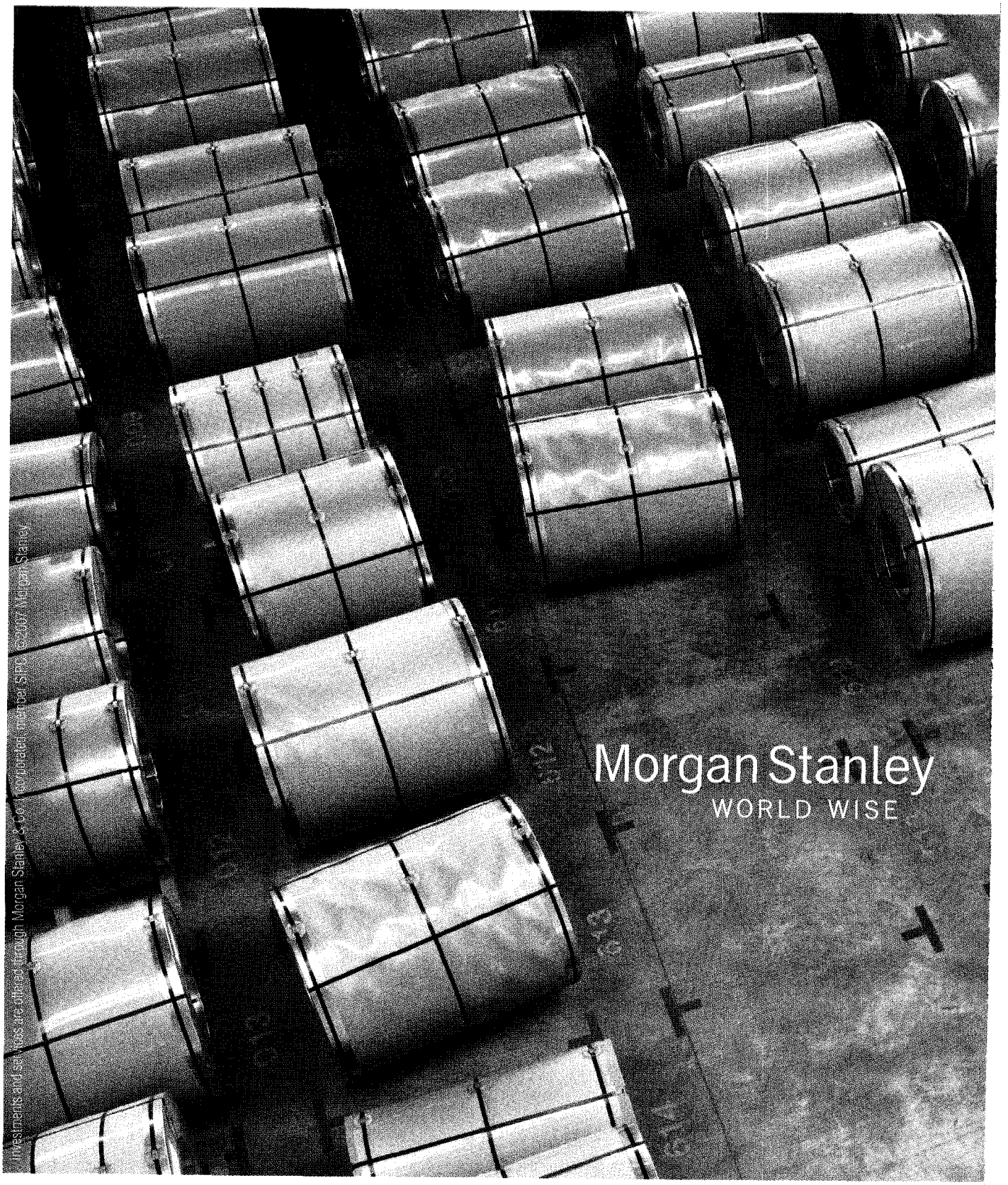

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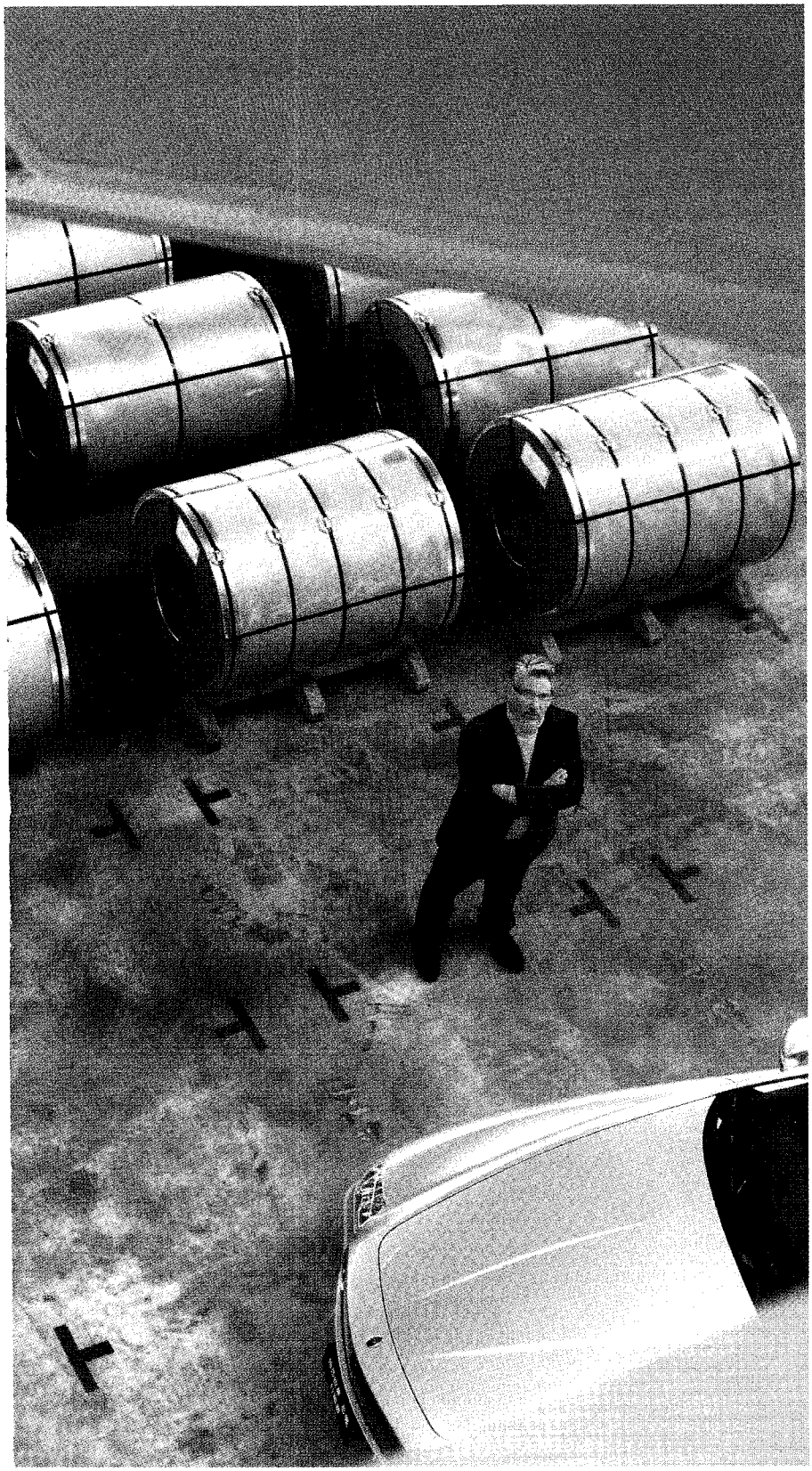

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to whites is palpable. I have felt it myself. Earlier this fall, I attended an Obama speech in Washington on tax policy that underwhelmed on delivery; his address was wooden, stilted, even tedious. It was only after I left the hotel that it occurred to me that I'd just been bored on tax policy by a national black leader. That I should have been struck by this was born in my own racial stereotypes, of course. But it won me over.

Obama is deeply aware of how he comes across to whites. In a revealing passage in his first book, he recounts how, in adolescence, he defused his white mother's fears that he was drifting into delinquency. She had marched into his room and demanded to know what was going on. He flashed her "a reassuring smile and patted her hand and told her not to worry." This, he tells us, was "usually an effective tactic," because people

> were satisfied as long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved—such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn't seem angry all the time.

And so you have Obama's campaign for white America: courteous and smiling and with no sudden moves. This may, of course, be one reason for his still-lukewarm support among many African Americans, a large number of whom back a white woman for the presidency. It may also be because African Americans (more than many whites) simply don't believe that a black man can win the presidency, and so are leery of wasting their vote. And the persistence of race as a divisive, even explosive factor in American life was unmissable the week of Obama's tax speech. While he was detailing middle-class tax breaks, thousands of activists were preparing to march in Jena, Louisiana, after a series of crude racial incidents had blown up into a polarizing conflict.

Jesse Jackson voiced puzzlement that Obama was not at the forefront of the march. "If I were a candidate, I'd be all over Jena," he remarked. The South Carolina newspaper *The State* reported that Jackson said Obama was "acting like he's white." Obama didn't jump into the fray (no sudden moves), but instead issued measured statements on Jena, waiting till a late-September address at Howard University to find his voice. It was simultaneously an endorsement of black identity politics and a distancing from it:

> When I'm president, we will no longer accept the false choice between being tough on crime and vigilant in our pursuit of justice. Dr. King said: "It's not either/or, it's both/and." We can have a crime policy that's both tough and smart. If you're convicted of a crime involving drugs, of course you should be punished. But let's not make the punishment for crack cocaine that much more severe than the punishment for powder cocaine when the real difference between the two is the skin color of the people using them. Judges think that's wrong. Republicans think that's wrong, Democrats think that's wrong, and yet it's been approved by Republican and Democratic presidents because no

SHE PUT ON HER LIPSTICK IN THE DARK

I really did meet a blind girl in Paris once.
It was in the garden of a museum,
Where I saw her touching the statues.
She had brown hair and an aquamarine scarf.

It was in the garden of the museum.
I told her I was a thief disguised as a guard.
She had brown hair and an aquamarine scarf.
She told me she was a student from Grenoble.

I told her I was not a thief disguised as a guard.
We had coffee at the little commissary.
She said she had time till her train to Grenoble.
We talked about our supreme belief in art.

We had coffee at the little commissary,
Then sat on a bench near the foundry.
We talked about our supreme belief in art.
She leaned her head upon my chest.

We kissed on a bench near the foundry.
I closed my eyes when no one was watching.
She leaned her head upon my chest.
The museum was closing. It was time to part.

I really did meet a blind girl in Paris once.
I never saw her again and she never saw me.
In a garden she touched the statues.
She put on her lipstick in the dark.

I close my eyes when no one is watching.
She had brown hair and an aquamarine scarf.
The museum was closing. It was time to part.
I never saw her again and she never saw me.

—STUART DISCHELL

Stuart Dischell's most recent collection is *Dig Safe* (2003). He teaches at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

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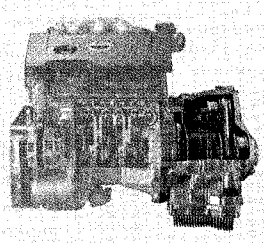

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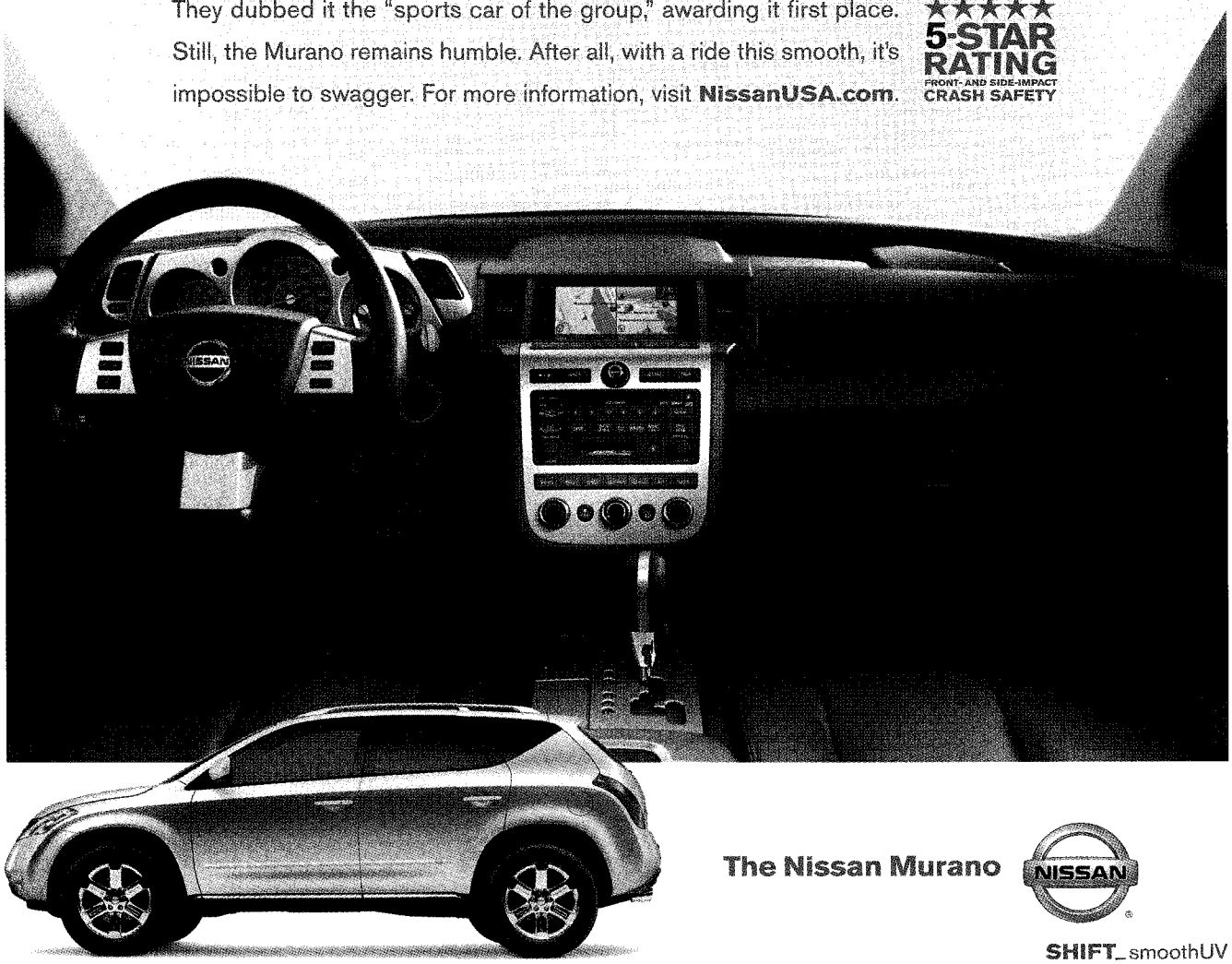

The Nissan Murano

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*The 2006 Nissan Murano won first place in *Motor Trend's* March 2007 comparison test over the 2007 Ford Edge, 2007 Hyundai Santa Fe and the 2007 Toyota Highlander. 2007 EPA fuel-economy estimates for Murano 2WD w/CVT are 20 mpg city/25 mpg highway. Actual mileage may vary. Government star ratings are part of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA's) New Car Assessment Program (www.safercar.gov). A 5-star rating is the highest government safety rating for driver and right-front-passenger seating positions in frontal crash tests and for front- and rear-passenger seating positions in side-impact crash tests. Model tested was 2007 Murano with standard side-impact air bags. Nissan, the Nissan Brand Symbol, "SHIFT_" tagline and Nissan model names are Nissan trademarks. Tread Lightly!® Please. Always wear your seat belt, and please don't drink and drive. ©2007 Nissan North America, Inc.

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one has been willing to brave the politics and make it right. That will end when I am president.

Obama's racial journey makes this kind of both/and politics something more than a matter of political compromise. The paradox of his candidacy is that, as potentially the first African American president in a country founded on slavery, he has taken pains to downplay the racial catharsis his candidacy implies. He knows race is important, and yet he knows that it turns destructive if it becomes the only important thing. In this he again subverts a Boomer paradigm, of black victimology or black conservatism. He is neither Al Sharpton nor Clarence Thomas; neither Julian Bond nor Colin Powell. Nor is he a post-racial figure like Tiger Woods, insofar as he has spent his life trying to reconnect with a black identity his childhood never gave him. Equally, he cannot be a Jesse Jackson. His white mother brought him up to be someone else.

In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama tells the story of a man with an almost eerily nonracial childhood, who has to learn what racism is, what his own racial identity is, and even what being black in America is. And so Obama's relationship to the black American experience is as much learned as intuitive. He broke up with a serious early girlfriend in part because she was white. He decided to abandon a post-racial career among the upper-middle classes of the East Coast in order to reengage with the black experience of Chicago's South Side. It was an act of integration—personal as well as communal—that called him to the work of community organizing.

This restlessness with where he was, this attempt at personal integration, represents both an affirmation of identity politics and a commitment to carving a unique personal identity out of the race, geography, and class he inherited. It yields an identity born of displacement, not rootedness. And there are times, I confess, when Obama's account of understanding his own racial experience seemed more like that of a gay teen discovering that he lives in two worlds simultaneously than that of a young African American confronting racism for the first time.

And there are also times when Obama's experience feels more like an immigrant story than a black memoir. His autobiography navigates a new and strange world of an American racial legacy that never quite defined him at his core. He therefore speaks to a complicated and mixed identity—not a simple and alienated one. This may hurt him among some African Americans, who may fail to identify with this fellow with an odd name. Black conservatives, like Shelby Steele, fear he is too deferential to the black establishment. Black leftists worry that he is not beholden at all. But there is no reason why African Americans cannot see the logic of Americanism that Obama also represents, a legacy that is ultimately theirs as well. To be black and white, to have belonged to a nonreligious home and a Christian church, to have attended a majority-Muslim school in Indonesia and a black church in urban Chicago, to be more than one thing and sometimes not fully anything—this is an increasingly common experience for Americans, including many racial minorities. Obama expresses such a conflicted but resilient identity before he even utters a word. And this complexity, with its internal tensions, contradictions, and moods, may increasingly be the main thing all Americans have in common.

None of this, of course, means that Obama will be the president some are dreaming of. His record in high office is sparse; his performances on the campaign trail have been patchy; his chief rival for the nomination, Senator Clinton, has bested him often with her relentless pursuit of the middle ground, her dogged attention to her own failings, and her much-improved speaking skills. At times, she has even managed to appear more inherently likable than the skinny, crabby, and sometimes morose newcomer from Chicago. Clinton's most surprising asset has been the sense of security she instills. Her husband—and the good feelings that nostalgics retain for his presidency—have buttressed her case. In dangerous times, popular majorities often seek the conservative option, broadly understood.

The paradox is that Hillary makes far more sense if you believe that times are actually pretty good. If you believe that America's current crisis is not a deep one, if you think that pragmatism alone will be enough to navigate a world on the verge of even more religious warfare, if you believe that today's ideological polarization is not dangerous, and that what appears dark today is an illusion fostered by the lingering trauma of the Bush presidency, then the argument for Obama is not that strong. Clinton will do. And a Clinton-Giuliani race could be as invigorating as it is utterly predictable.

But if you sense, as I do, that greater danger lies ahead, and that our divisions and recent history have combined to make the American polity and constitutional order increasingly vulnerable, then the calculus of risk changes. Sometimes, when the world is changing rapidly, the greater risk is caution. Close-up in this election campaign, Obama is unlikely. From a distance, he is necessary. At a time when America's estrangement from the world risks tipping into dangerous imbalance, when a country at war with lethal enemies is also increasingly at war with itself, when humankind's spiritual yearnings veer between an excess of certainty and an inability to believe anything at all, and when sectarian and racial divides seem as intractable as ever, a man who is a bridge between these worlds may be indispensable.

We may in fact have finally found that bridge to the 21st century that Bill Clinton told us about. Its name is Obama.

Andrew Sullivan, an *Atlantic* senior editor, blogs at andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com. His most recent book, *The Conservative Soul*, has just been published in paperback.

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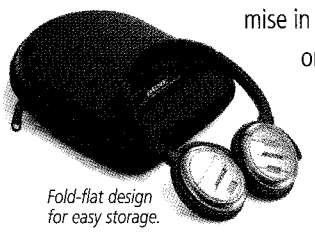

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Hillary Clinton tried to teach Barack Obama about power, but then he got ideas of his own. A story of nasty surprises, dueling war rooms, and the *Drudge Report*

BY MARC AMBINDER

Teacher and Apprentice

A few weeks after he was elected to the U.S. Senate, Barack Obama told his staff he wanted to meet with Hillary Clinton. In her years as a senator, Clinton had deftly navigated many of the challenges that now confronted Obama. She had come to the Senate as a national figure whose celebrity eclipsed (and therefore imperiled) her status as a freshman senator. She had a broad but shallow base of support among the voters she represented. And she, like Obama, held national political ambitions that depended heavily on how well she performed in the Senate. ¶ On February 1, 2005, the two talked for an hour in Clinton's cheerful, canary-yellow Senate office. Obama developed a good sense of the Clinton »

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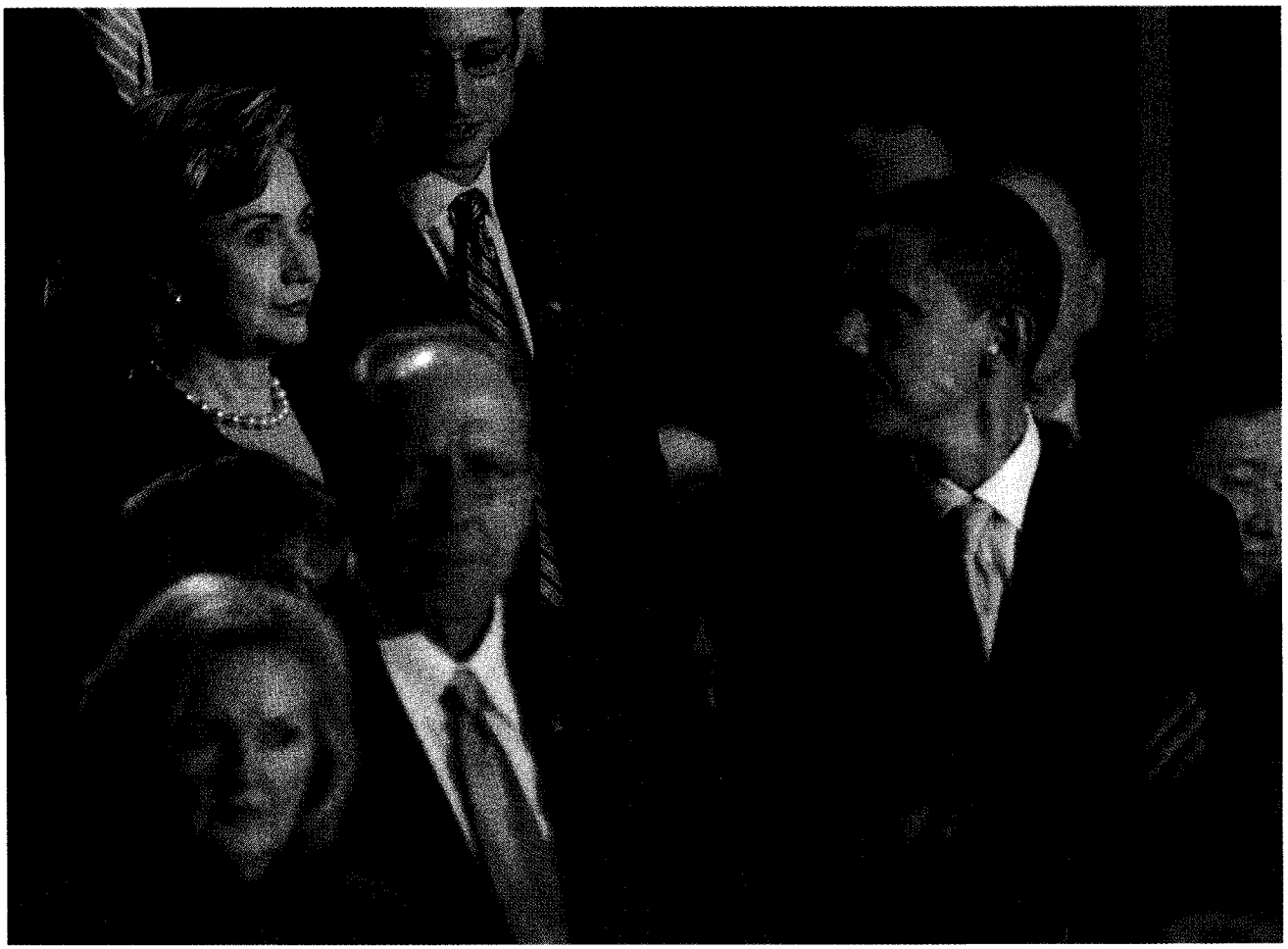

BROOKS KRAFT

algorithm for success: Don't be a showboat. Keep your head down. Choose the right committees, the ones that will allow you to deliver tangible benefits to your state. Go to hearings, stay the whole time, wait to speak, follow the lead of the chair or the ranking member, and remain quiet and humble at press conferences.

"I hadn't known her well prior to joining the Senate," Obama told me in New Hampshire this fall. "We had a similarity in that we both came in with a celebrity that outstripped our actual power, although I think it was much more pronounced for her than it was for me."

The senators' staffs soon paired off. Obama's aides drew on Clinton's example to face the barrage of questions aimed at the new senator. These ranged from those that confront all senators—how should they tend to the interests of downstate constituents?—to those that confront only a few. "We had people who wanted, for different causes, to auction off signed copies of the senator's books," an Obama aide recalls. "How do you deal with that? Who do you say yes to? Who do you say no to? We asked ourselves, 'Who else would know how to deal with it?' The Clinton folks."

Clinton's staff was collegial. Obama's overture was viewed by some as genuflection to the party's natural leader, its likely presidential nominee; Obama himself was thought of as a possible apprentice and, perhaps one day, an heir. Clinton's own decision to run for president had a whiff of destiny about it—she'd been preparing for years, had served four years as a senator, and had developed a nuanced political strategy. Some of her top advisers exuded a sense of entitlement: Clinton deserved to be president; it was her turn. They did not perceive any threat until it was almost too late.

During Obama's first year in the Senate, nothing suggested that the Clinton assessment was wrong. Even inside Obama's world, "the Plan," as his top advisers dubbed their long-term strategy, largely conformed to the road map Clinton had laid out.

The Plan didn't call for sacrificing Obama's political fame so much as allowing it to attenuate and bringing his ego into line with his role as a senator in the minority party. The hope was that questions like the one posed by a journalist during Obama's first week in the Senate—"What is your place in history?"—would dissipate, allowing him to focus on the interests of Illinois and build toward bigger things. Nothing foreclosed larger ambitions. "Would I tell you that it never came up in any discussion, anytime, anywhere—that sometime in the future, Barack

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Obama would run for national office?" Obama's chief adviser, David Axelrod, asked me. "If I told you that, you'd turn your tape recorder off, and we'd end this conversation, because you'd think everything I told you was a lie." But in early 2005, the context of those discussions was at least 10 years in the future.

Initially, Obama did try to avoid publicity, turning down repeated requests to appear on national television, as well as invitations to speak before Democratic groups. "We wanted to be mindful of our place," Robert Gibbs, his spokesman, told me. Even on the issue of Iraq, which dominated 2005, Obama, an opponent of the invasion from the beginning, passed up the chance to speak out. "He could have been the moral voice, the moral authority on Iraq," one of Obama's closest advisers told me. "But he was just a freshman senator. It would have been presumptuous of him to take that lead." In January of 2006, appearing on *Meet the Press*, Obama reiterated his intention to serve a full six-year term.

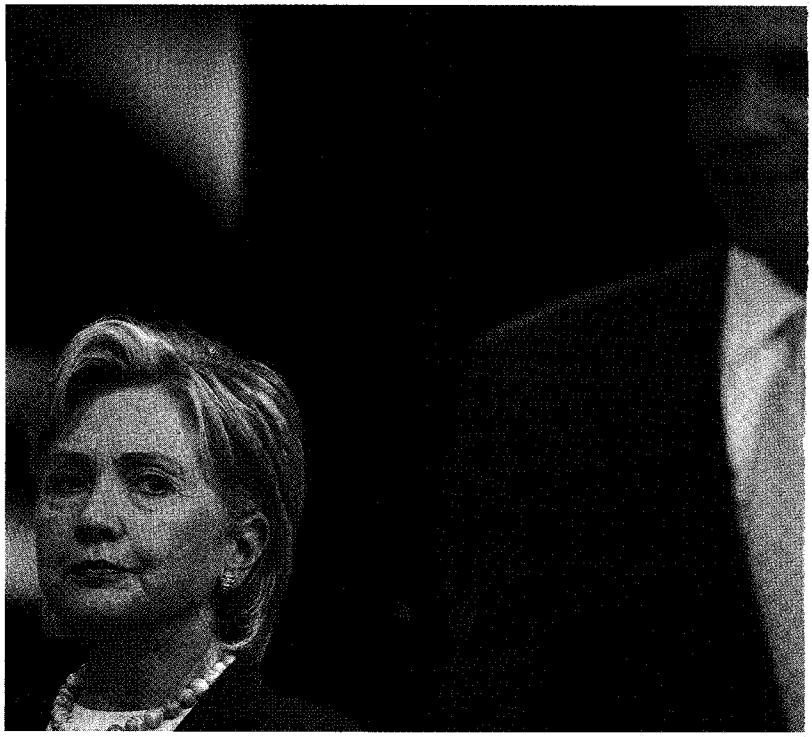
But something changed—and fairly rapidly. Obama diverged from the Clinton path and decided to challenge the former first lady for the presidency.

Clinton, focused at the time on the challenge posed by John Edwards, was blindsided. She, too, could have run for president shortly after winning a Senate seat. In 2003, Bill Clinton suggested that his most discreet pollster, Mark Penn, measure how his wife would fare against the Democrats then running for president—and confirmed that she would handily defeat them all. But Clinton herself was not ready. Even after the 2004 election, both Clintons feared that if New Yorkers caught wind of her presidential preparations, they would conclude that the ever-ambitious Hillary Clinton was using New York as a stepping-stone. Nothing was more important to Clinton's presidential prospects, they calculated, than establishing her own political identity. So, while maintaining her popularity with the Democratic base, she spent six productive, if unglamorous, years in the Senate.

Obama's starkly different choice had several immediate effects. It forced Democrats to think anew about Clintonism, not in comparison to a Republican alternative, as would have been the case, but to a Democratic one whose chief attributes—freshness, vigor, reform—put Clintonism in a harsh light. More broadly, it threatened to upend the way politicians have traditionally pursued the presidency: through years of careful preparation and positioning. But first he would have to get past the woman whose advice he solicited, then spurned.

What caused Obama to suddenly decide to run? The conventional explanation is that Democrats implored him to. "It was the closest thing to a draft that I've seen in my years of participating in politics," Axelrod told me. Obama, having invested considerable time and effort studying the traditional path to the presidency, seems to have concluded that his unique biography perfectly suited the historical moment. (Obama's friends speak of this process as his "calling.")

Many Obama friends and advisers believe that the realization he actually could be president first hit Obama on December 1, 2006, which happened to be World AIDS Day. Obama appeared at the megachurch in Orange County, California, run by Rick Warren, the best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and an emerging force in national politics. Sam Brownback, the Republican senator from Kansas, spoke first. "Welcome to my house," he said to Obama, as the crowd laughed. When Obama rose to speak, he replied, "There is one thing I've got to say, Sam: This is my house, too. This is God's house." Before an audience of socially conservative evangelical Christians, Obama then called for "realism" and advocated the use of condoms to control the spread of AIDS. As the next day's *Orange County Register* described it, Obama received a "hearty standing ovation." Could any other Democrat, Obama wondered, talk to evangelicals about condoms in Africa?



JOHN GRESS/REUTERS/CORBIS

Another theory, held by longtime advisers like Dan Shomon, who was Obama's chief of staff in the Illinois state senate, is that an ambitious, action-oriented

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politician was propelled toward the presidential race by the Senate's sluggish pace and partisan provincialism. Obama told me that he did not find the Senate boring. But in more jocular moods, such as when he appeared on *The Daily Show*, he has admitted that the Senate "is paralyzing, and it's designed for you to take bad votes." He confessed to Illinois' other senator, Dick Durbin, "It's hard for me to believe that it's a lot harder to get something done here than [as a state senator] in Springfield."

In the spring of 2006, the presidency was clearly on Obama's mind when he told his friend Martha Minnow that his wife would have to give her assent to a run. "Michelle was the boss, and he said he couldn't do it unless she agreed," Minnow told me. At the time, one of Michelle Obama's friends told me that she worried her husband would be targeted by white supremacists and wind up a martyr like Robert F. Kennedy. She also worried that his advisers were pushing him too hard to consider a run and, knowing her husband's healthy ego, that he wasn't in the proper frame of mind to think seriously about it.

to a participant. "Why do you want to do this? What does this mean for us? What's our motivation? What will get us through the hard times?"

The group gave surprisingly little thought to other candidates, especially Edwards, who was positioning himself as the alternative to Clinton. Axelrod had worked for Edwards in the 2004 campaign until he left over strategic differences. Others in the campaign considered Edwards—a multimillionaire trial lawyer—an obvious phony, and assumed voters would see him that way, too. This left Obama as the purist's choice, the natural home for what they expected to be a large anti-Hillary vote. There was ample evidence to support this supposition: When word spread that the Obama aide Steve Hildebrand had been put in charge of hiring staff for the early-primary states, Obama's office was flooded with more than 1,000 résumés.

Donors, too, lined up in support. A month before the midterm election, Mark Warner, the former Virginia governor and a top-tier hopeful, suddenly decided not to run for president. Warner had occupied the same political

News that the Clinton campaign is funneling information to Matt Drudge is potentially explosive—few figures inspire more liberal wrath than Drudge.

When Obama went on tour in the fall of 2006 to promote his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, some of his friends encouraged him to be open about his presidential ruminations. The result was a sustained wave of national publicity. *Time* put Obama on the cover with the headline "Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President." The public responded, too. An appearance in Seattle sold out in two hours, leaving scalpers to profit from Obama's popularity. Appearing on *Meet the Press* in October, when Tim Russert played a clip from the January 2006 show in which Obama had said he wouldn't run, Obama simply responded that he had begun to think seriously about it.

On November 8, the day after Democrats took control of Congress, Obama, his wife, and his brain trust crowded into a fourth-floor conference room in the brick building in Chicago's Loop that houses Axelrod's consulting firm. "I want you to show me how you're going to do this," Michelle Obama said, according to an aide. "You need to show me that this is not going to be a bullshit fly-by-night campaign." A month later, at an all-day meeting in Chicago billed as "the Summit," the would-be campaign manager, David Plouffe, returned with a budget, an outline of early strategy, and a list of tasks to be accomplished before any campaign could begin. The conversation in the second meeting "had an existential quality to it," according

space that Obama would inhabit: fresh face, new ideas, the "change" candidate. Warner's fund-raising operation expected to raise $50 million in the first half of 2007. (Obama's would eventually raise $56 million for the primaries in that period.) Many of his major donors had rejected, privately and in some cases formally, overtures from the Clinton campaign, and thus they gravitated naturally toward Obama.

Obama didn't immediately take to fund-raising, and he pressured his schedulers to limit the time he spent soliciting donations, but he nonetheless succeeded spectacularly. "He worked much harder at this than I thought he would as a first-timer," William Daley, the former commerce secretary and an adviser to Obama, told me. "He was very good about calling people and asking for money, asking for big dollars. Other politicians have trouble with that. John McCain hates that. Still hates it. Barack didn't have a problem with that."

In mid-December, after a successful trip to New Hampshire and a surprise appearance on *Monday Night Football*, Obama met former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, once a presidential hopeful himself, for dinner at Tosca, one of Daschle's favorite Washington restaurants, and had what Daschle describes as a four-hour "heart-to-heart." Daschle's message was clear: "Don't think that you're going

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to have another opportunity in 2012 and 2016," he told Obama. "You might. But—like me—you might not."

Throughout this period, Obama was meeting with the major interest groups in the party establishment, and he often made a point of doing so on his own terms. One meeting stands out as characteristic of the aloof way in which Obama has dealt with the groups that compose the party's foundation: a dinner Obama had with some of the Democrats' most powerful African American women, who jokingly refer to themselves as "the Colored Girls"—political veterans, some of whom had struggled for decades to achieve stature in an arena dominated by white men. Several, such as Minyon Moore, the former political director of the DNC, had already committed to Clinton.

Obama swept in "as if he owned the table," an aide admitted later; he brushed aside questions about his preparedness to run and declared—offending some in the room—that race would not be a big factor, because he did not anticipate making it a large part of his campaign. To an audience well versed in the subjects of race and politics, Obama's naïveté, and his apparent desire to simply wave away the question of establishment dues-paying, didn't sit well. Obama, however, seems to have drawn a kind of sustenance from the dinner.

"A lot of those women are good friends; they'd all be supporters of mine if I just stayed in the U.S. Senate," he told me. "Talking with them about potentially running for president caused some conflicts, because a sizable number of them are very close to Senator Clinton. I think there's no doubt that it would be easier for a lot of people in Washington if I had decided that I was going to take a pass and wait my appropriate turn, which might be, from their perspective, 10 years from now, or at least once the Clintons had exhausted all possibilities of running any further."

Obama clearly felt that the Clintons had already exhausted their possibilities as leaders. They "have been the dominant political force in the Democratic Party for 20 years," he said. "A sizable number of prominent Democrats in Washington, the sort of government-in-waiting, all came in with the Clintons. There's enormous loyalty there, as there should be. What's interesting is that they all came in as outsiders; most of them came in as outsiders running against Washington. They're now Washington, and I don't think there's any denying that Washington established a set of rules that people get comfortable with about how you play the game."

Indeed, candidate Obama has ignored the old rules. To an audience of Detroit auto executives, for example, he proposed tough new fuel-economy standards. Before black pastors, he spoke about eradicating homophobia from black churches. To the National Education Association, he used a phrase—*merit pay*—that's practically an epithet. Unlike Clinton, who was solicitous of every conceivable interest group, Obama was selective. He stiffed firefighters in New Hampshire and the AARP in Iowa. He nearly skipped the winter meeting of the Democratic National Committee, which would have been a very big deal (the campaign didn't want to waste money hosting parties for DNC members); in the end, Obama appeared before the jubilantly partisan crowd just long enough to deliver a broadside against partisanship, and left.

This approach to the Democratic establishment and the Clintons, which would ultimately become the core of Obama's campaign message, is what Washington insiders refer to as "process-oriented"—it is concerned less with specific policies and positions than with broad themes related to politics itself, such as the party's architecture, its larger purpose, and the roles that various political actors play.

THE VOLUPTUOUS DANCING GIRLS OF EGYPT

—exhibited at the Paris Exposition, 1889

The Voluptuous Dancing Girls of Egypt
are seen in the streets of Cairo, dining
at the Romanian restaurant, or visiting
Paraguay, across from the Medicine Pavilion

with its harlequined maps of anatomy,
bread made with seawater for dyspeptics,
and twin exhibits: "A Curious Case of Sweating"
and "Chest Development Due to Gymnastics."

At Machinery Hall, sympathetic ink
applies itself to a canvas of a winter scene.
Cobalt chloride sifted over the bushes,
when heated, turns the landscape green.

The Voluptuous Dancing Girls of Egypt
synchronize their watches
at the Palace of Industry, then take in
"The History of Human Habitation"—

cave dwellers capable of cultivating
pineapples. To return to the Hive
of Memory, they must wait their turn
at the perfumery, to dab vitriol on their wrists.

—ROBIN EKISS

Robin Ekiss is a former Stegner Fellow at Stanford whose work has appeared in *Poetry*, *TriQuarterly*, *The New England Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in San Francisco.

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In late December, Obama went with his family to his native Hawaii. He took long walks, ate lots of food, and spent a good deal of time with his family as he inched closer to a decision. On Tuesday, January 2, he spent four hours with Axelrod in his Chicago office. On Sunday, Obama called Daschle at home and broke the news: He was going to run.

One of the mysteries of this presidential cycle is how the Clinton operation, with its vaunted foresight, failed to see Obama coming. Politically, the Clinton presidential team did very little early on, aside from holding a series of meetings among a very small group of advisers: Penn, campaign manager Patti Solis Doyle, communications adviser Howard Wolfson, media strategist Mandy Grunwald, and occasionally the veteran Democratic operative Harold Ickes and a few other confidants. In the spring of 2006, they were still eyeing John Edwards. After Edwards took a far more aggressive policy approach than Team Clinton had anticipated, Hillary Clinton responded by delivering a series of policy speeches, now largely forgotten. (Aides insisted she was not responding to Edwards, but many Clinton insiders say otherwise.) Barack Obama barely registered. Penn had not yet included him in his occasional surreptitious polls of the primary electorate.

A few Clinton advisers did detect danger. On September 17, 2006, when Obama gave the keynote address at Senator Tom Harkin's annual steak fry in Iowa, Steve Hildebrand was spotted shepherding Obama through the crowd. The next day, Solis Doyle e-mailed Hildebrand to make clear that she knew he had been there.

One Clinton adviser admitted to me that it wasn't until late January of this year when, in a short period of time, Obama got fund-raising pledges from four of the party's top fund-raisers—Orin Kramer, a New York hedge-fund manager; Alan Solomont, a Boston venture capitalist; Mark Gorenberg, who was one of John Kerry's top bundlers; and Steve Westly, the former California controller—that Clinton's inner circle finally understood the threat Obama posed.

Obama's rise was particularly worrisome for two reasons. First, money is the mechanism by which the Clintons exert leverage over the party. Some Clinton supporters believed the couple's sway over the party's money machinery is even more important than their popularity with the Democratic base. So the defection of major fund-raisers was a serious blow.

Second, part of the grand strategy for Hillary Clinton's run at the White House was to build a movement around her gender and the possibility of electing the first female president. Penn, the campaign's visionary, believed that presenting Clinton's candidacy as a historic occasion would reinspire voters badly disillusioned after eight years of George W. Bush. But Obama, the first credible black candidate, assumed the symbolic role that Clinton's team had in mind for her. His reception by voters and the media was rapturous. Obama's potential appeal had occurred to Clinton's advisers, but as several of them later admitted, they failed to anticipate the intensity with which the Democratic Party and the national media would embrace him.

In April, after Obama announced his record fund-raising total for the primaries, the Clinton campaign began to panic. Basic strategy was called into question. Senior advisers began to fight with each other. In an extraordinary interview with *Time*, Terry McAuliffe, Clinton's campaign chairman, seemed to blame Clinton herself for not working hard enough. Obama, McAuliffe said, "works the phones like a dog. He probably did three to four times the number of events she did" since the start of the campaign. "No matter who I call, he has already called them three or four times."

On behalf of the Clinton camp, James Carville continued to try to tamp down excitement over Obama by saying publicly that he expected Al Gore to get in the race. Worried advisers to Bill Clinton unsuccessfully tried to oust Solis Doyle, who had never run a campaign. A Clinton staffer told me that going to work was like stepping into a snake pit.

Then came a pivot point—the moment when Clinton's campaign felt the idealized view of Obama suddenly snap into alignment with the reality, and in doing so realign the contours of the race to emphasize precisely the asset Clinton had cultivated: her immediate readiness to become commander in chief. The moment came at the first Democratic debate, in South Carolina. The moderator, Brian Williams of NBC, asked the candidates to respond to a scenario in which two American cities were hit by terrorists and the responsible parties were identified. "The first thing we'd have to do," Obama answered, "is make sure that we've got an effective emergency response, something that this administration failed to do when we had a hurricane in New Orleans. And I think that we have to review how we operate in the event of not only a natural disaster, but also a terrorist attack." Only after that did Obama suggest that he might "take potentially some action to dismantle that network." Clinton spotted her opening, and pounced. "I think a president must move as swiftly as is prudent to retaliate," she declared. "If we are attacked, and we can determine who is behind that attack, and if there are nations that supported or gave material aid to those who attacked us, I believe we should quickly respond." Obama immediately recognized his error, and circled back a few moments later: "But one thing that I do have to go back on, on this issue of terrorism: We have genuine enemies out there that have to be hunted down, networks [that] have to be dismantled."

But Williams's trap—the question designed to draw out contrasts between the candidates—had already snared

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Obama. Later, Obama concluded that Clinton had weathered enough Republican attacks to understand where the minefields lay. "So if the question comes up on terrorism," he told me, putting himself in her mind, "your goal is to look tough, and the first thing out of the box is *retaliate*."

"What happened," Axelrod told me, "was that he got asked the question, and I think he started answering it based on 'What would you do if there were a terrorist attack?' without focusing on the second half of the question, which was to change our military strategy." Axelrod insisted that voters accepted Obama's answer. But he conceded that for Clinton and the press, "it was pivotal, and helped fuel a story line that they ran with. I give the Clinton people credit: They did a great job of spinning it, hard, and I think they may have gotten some benefit out of it."

As the race settled into a summer lull, this cycle would repeat itself, the Clinton campaign exploiting anything it believed was a gaffe—such as when Obama answered a question in another debate by saying he would meet with morally dubious world leaders in the first year of his presidency without preconditions. The media's willingness to accept each campaign's preferred narrative—Clinton's "experience" versus Obama's "judgment"—helps explain why Obama's answer was considered to be faulty. "That's sort of the pitfalls of the sound bite. He fell into that," Obama's friend Marty Nesbitt told me.

Here, Obama's novelty worked against him. The national press corps places tremendous importance on consistency with an established narrative. Lacking a basis to judge Obama's neophyte foreign-policy views, reporters were much more willing than they otherwise might have been to accept the Clinton campaign's charge that Obama's answer was naive. They weren't nearly as willing to accept the countercharge from the Obama campaign that Clinton herself had flip-flopped in answering the question (earlier in the year, while criticizing Bush's recalcitrance about meeting with rogue leaders, she had expressed practically the same sentiment as Obama), because such a slip-up didn't track with the emerging campaign narrative of Clinton as disciplined and savvy. Nor could Obama's campaign deploy, as Clinton's did, an army of surrogates to flood the airwaves and drive home a point. In August, Obama told a reporter that under no circumstances would he use a nuclear weapon to destroy terrorist bunkers in Afghanistan or Pakistan. The Clinton campaign again pressed charges of inexperience. A year earlier, as it turned out, Clinton had said essentially the same thing as Obama in response to Bush administration posturing about nuclear weapons. But reporters largely ignored this fact, because it wasn't in character for Clinton to mess up.

Perhaps the ultimate example of hard-won experience is the relationship that developed last year, brokered by an outside ally, between the Clinton campaign and a man who was once a sworn enemy: Matt Drudge, the Internet pioneer. (News of the Monica Lewinsky scandal first broke on the *Drudge Report*.) In a Democratic primary, news that the Clinton campaign is funneling information to Drudge is potentially explosive—few figures inspire more liberal wrath than Drudge. (When I confronted the mole, she confirmed the connection to Drudge, but first asked for anonymity out of fear that her job and professional reputation would be jeopardized by the association.) Still, Drudge has proved a useful tool for the campaign in framing media coverage. When it became clear that Obama had raised more first-quarter money for the primary race than Clinton had, the Clinton campaign minimized the damage by preemptively leaking its own numbers to Drudge. "Clinton Blows the Field Away" was the headline on an exclusive Drudge story claiming she had raised $36 million. Only later, with much less fanfare, did it become clear that only $19 million would count toward the Democratic primary.

'You need to show me that this is not going to be a bullshit fly-by-night campaign,' Michelle Obama said.

The Clinton campaign has also used Drudge to go on offense. In one example, an aide confirmed that the campaign sent Drudge a link to a story in which Michelle Obama seemed to take a swipe at Hillary Clinton over Bill's infidelity. The story was presented—from Clinton to Drudge to the public—in a manner that was badly out of context, with a link to an exclusive videotape of Michelle Obama's comment. But it nevertheless dominated the news cycle for 24 hours.

The major problem with a process-oriented campaign, as Democrats from Gary Hart to Bill Bradley have discovered, is that it tends to appeal to elites, who vote aspirationally, rather than to the much broader pool of primary voters, who tend to focus on tangibles, such as health-care benefits and tax credits. Clinton has won support with policies targeted at older voters, women, and those without a college degree—what political analysts term "downscale voters," who also happen to dominate

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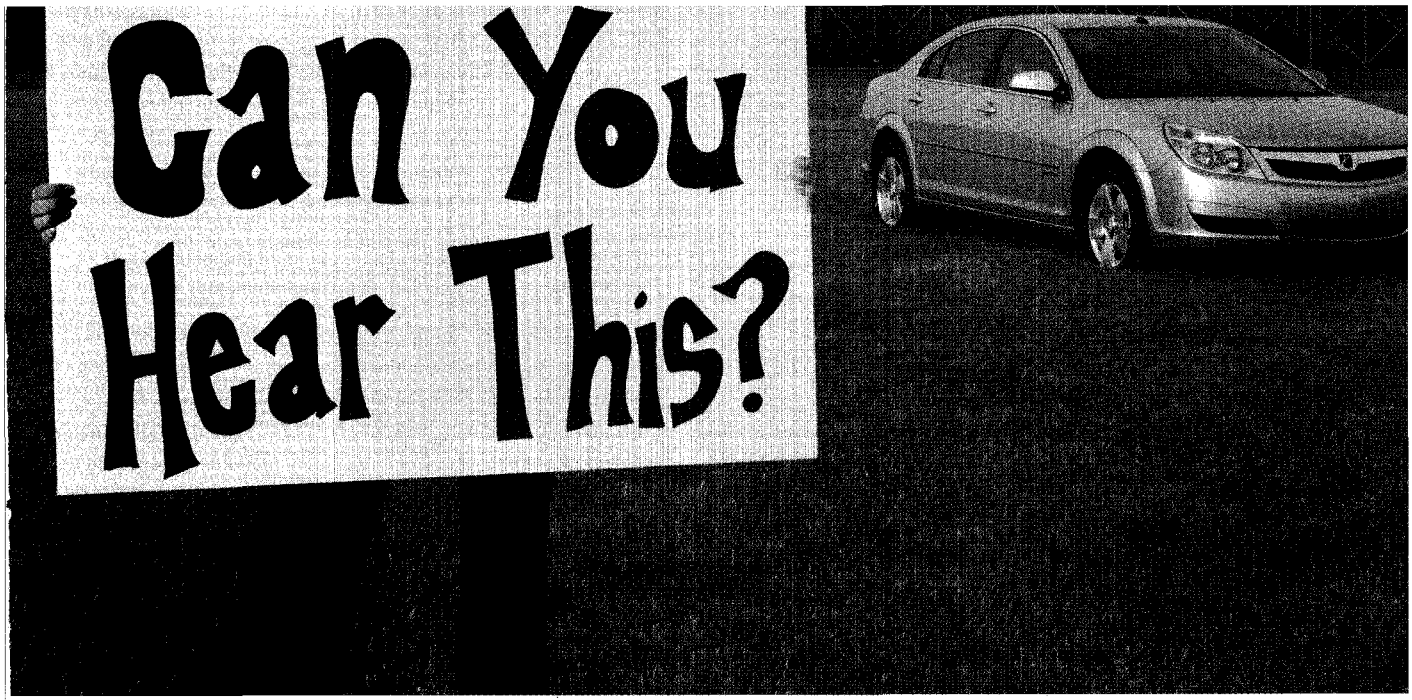

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the Democratic electorate in places like Iowa, which holds the first presidential caucus.

Another tension in process campaigns is behavioral. Practitioners can become handcuffed by their own idealism. Having pledged to run "a different kind of campaign" that wouldn't traffic in the mudslinging and personal attacks so common to politics today, Obama boxed himself in. "The campaigns shouldn't be about making each other look bad," he declared in his brief appearance at the DNC winter meeting. "They should be about figuring out how we can all do some good for this precious country of ours. That's our mission. And in this mission, our rivals won't be one another, and I would assert it won't even be the other party. It's going to be cynicism that we're fighting against." This kind of sentiment is a large part of Obama's appeal. But it's also a good illustration of why process-oriented campaigns often run into trouble. Committing himself to a higher standard of conduct meant that either Obama would refrain from doing much of what campaigns do to jockey for position or he would endure criticism for failing to live up to his own standard. In a campaign staffed by talented, though conventional, operatives, this would prove problematic.

In June, Obama's staff slipped reporters a memorandum about the Clintons' financial ties to Indian American entrepreneurs who benefited from job outsourcing—an act well within the norm of political conduct, though the memo did have a rather tasteless title ("Hillary Clinton, D-Punjab"). A Clinton aide caught wind of it and, no doubt inspired by Obama's call for better conduct, persuaded a reporter for a Capitol Hill newspaper to disclose its source. Obama was forced to apologize.

But he pointedly did not pledge to refrain from disseminating such information about his opponent. Belatedly, his campaign has learned to fight back. In August, Obama's team scored a significant hit by helping to place a story in several newspapers revealing that Norman Hsu, a major Clinton donor, had skipped town after having pleaded no contest to a charge of grand theft 15 years earlier and still faced an outstanding warrant. Hsu fled once more (he was captured in Colorado in September) and ignited a costly media frenzy for Clinton, who decided to return $850,000 in donations that he had arranged for her. (Hsu had also contributed to Obama.)

But Obama seemed to recoil from many of the tasks that have come to be expected of someone serious about running for president. Cerebral and loquacious, given to lengthy disquisitions, Obama chafed at the sound-bite culture of politics and disliked criticizing opponents by name. One day in New Hampshire, caught up in the moment, he called Hillary "Bush-Cheney lite"—a phrase he never again repeated. Occasionally, Obama behaved as if conventional expectations were beneath him and an insult to voters' intelligence. "The one thing I am absolutely certain of," Obama told me, "is that if all I'm offering is the same Democratic narrative that has been offered for the last 20 years, then there's really no point in my running, because Senator Clinton is going to be very adept at delivering that message. What makes it worthwhile for me to run is the belief that we can actually change the narrative and create a working majority that we haven't seen in a very long time—and that, frankly, the Clintons never put together." Though he dislikes cattle-call interest-group forums, he prepared diligently for a June forum on black issues at Howard University in Washington, D.C., understanding that, by dint of his race and life experience, he had a chance to shine. Obama believed he'd excelled during the debate, and was stunned when press coverage focused on a single applause line—from Hillary Clinton. "If HIV/AIDS were the leading cause [of] the death of white women between the ages of 25 and 34, there would be an outraged outcry in this country," she had declared. Obama, by contrast, was chided for his long-winded answers. "He was very, very frustrated," one of his friends recalls.

Two weeks later, at an NAACP forum in Philadelphia, Obama, according to *The New Republic*'s Jonathan Cohn, "played to the crowd." The press rewarded him. A friend e-mailed him a note of congratulations. "Well, but all I did was throw sound bites back at them," Obama wrote back.

His campaign staffers, too, have become frustrated by the focus of the media's attention, specifically that the press has not covered Clinton in the way they expected it would. During an interview this summer, Obama's friend Valerie Jarrett said to me, unbidden, "He is a man who is devoted to his wife. There aren't going to be any skeletons in his closet in terms of his personal life at all. Period." And at a campaign event in Iowa, one of Obama's aides plopped down next to me and spoke even more bluntly. He wanted to know when reporters would begin to look into Bill Clinton's postpresidential sex life.

Before Obama decided to run, his advisers spent little time debating strategy and focused instead on how their candidate would maintain his sense of self—his "authenticity," as one of them put it to me. This helps to explain why they regarded so many of his early stumbles as insignificant instances of simply failing to conform to the standard way of running for president. But as the race for the nomination heads into the final stretch, many of the things they thought would unfold have so far failed to materialize.

Early on, Obama's aides sneered at the Clinton campaign for subordinating strategy to tactics and boasted that Obama had explicitly rejected the day-to-day combat that consumed Clinton's team. "It was a deliberate choice we made," one of Obama's closest advisers told me. "And I think it was a mistake." This adviser added that many of the assumptions about Hillary Clinton were flawed, too.

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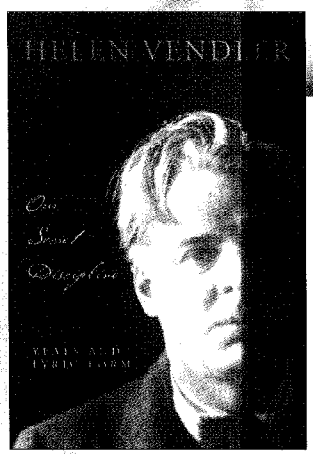

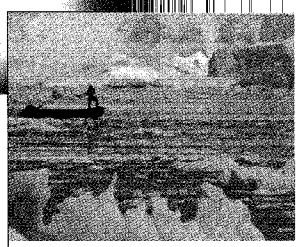

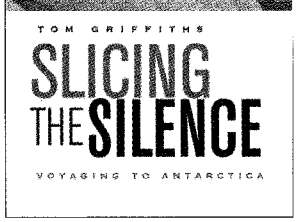

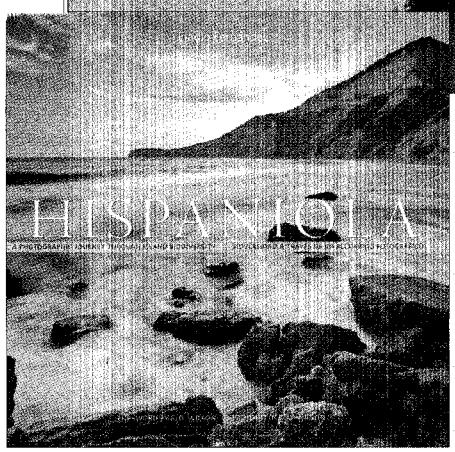

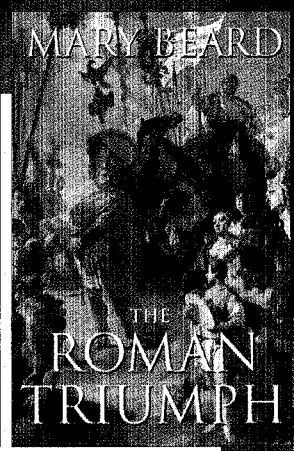

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FOREWORD BY EDWARD O. WILSON

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In particular, Obama and his aides assumed that Democrats would judge Clinton to be too polarizing to win; so far the polls do not bear that out.

Axelrod won't concede that the campaign misread Clinton. "If we underestimated anything," he said, "it was the degree to which people would assign credit to her for the years of the Clinton administration—that that was sort of quasi-executive experience, whether warranted or not warranted. The name itself implied a certain mastery; she gets bonus points for that, to a degree that I think was surprising. I think those come with challenges, but she gets them."

One great surprise to the Obama team was Clinton's remarkable transformation on the one issue where Obama indisputably trumped her in the eyes of the party's electorate: the Iraq War. By summer's end, Obama's advisers believed that Clinton had largely neutralized their attacks. Clinton's advisers cite two reasons for their success: first, that her congressional voting record on Iraq was virtually identical to his; and second, that Clinton deftly exploited the vicissitudes of congressional debate, which focused almost exclusively on how and when to withdraw troops. Reasoning, correctly, that Democratic voters were as interested in what should be done now as in who voted for the war then, she used clear, forward-looking language: "If George Bush doesn't end this war before he leaves office, when I'm president, I will." It worked.

Last February, I asked Hillary Clinton to describe how she has changed since leaving the White House. At the time, her answer struck me as typical Clinton boilerplate: She brought to the presidential race a "unique combination of experience both from my life prior to the White House and the eight years in the White House and now my full term in the Senate, where I've learned even more about how to get things done in the Senate, about how to build coalitions."

Looking back now, on the eve of the Democratic primaries, her answer seems a lot more credible. Clinton spent six years in a nonexecutive role. She gained firsthand experience working with her enemies. She spent four years as the chair of the Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee, ordinarily a thankless bureaucratic post that requires fielding complaints from every conceivable corner of the party, but in Clinton's case an invaluable opportunity to listen and connect. And when the chance arrived, in 2004, to cut short her apprenticeship and seek the White House, she passed.

"I always felt that it was a good thing that she spent all those years in the Senate, and maybe didn't meet with as many fund-raisers as she could have," a high-level Clinton campaign official told me. "At the end of the day, this created a texture—a knowledge—that really comes out."

Most surprising, Clinton has even managed to repair her relationship with the press, a change that seems to have made her more secure in her political identity than she's generally given credit for being. For all the criticism she's endured as being calculating and politically opportunistic, Clinton has steadfastly ignored entreaties from some advisers and criticism from the press, and refused to apologize for her 2002 vote in favor of the Iraq War. Her private refrain, say insiders, is the same as her public one: "I've done nothing wrong, so I have nothing to apologize for."

At a campaign event in Iowa, one of Obama's aides plopped down next to me. He wanted to know when reporters would begin to look into Bill Clinton's postpresidential sex life.

In the weeks ahead, Obama is likely to argue that Democrats cannot trust Clinton to create the change they're longing for, while Clinton will embrace the role of nominee-apparent. Obama's advisers believe Edwards will fade before the Iowa caucuses and—assuming those who don't yet support Clinton probably don't want to—that his support will naturally flow to Obama. And they're convinced that the Democratic Party's decision to invalidate Florida's delegates as punishment for holding an early primary provides a great benefit for Obama by giving him a pretext to bypass an expensive early state. Axelrod maintains that doubts about Clinton will grow as the primaries draw nearer, and that Obama's cautious campaign will ultimately prevail. One important advantage Obama has over insurgent-idealists who preceded him (like Hart and Bradley) is that he has the money to keep pace with the front-runner.

In the end, though, Hillary Clinton may be the candidate who best understood the Democratic electorate—she certainly understood and accepted the demands placed upon anyone serious about winning. A primary that Obama hoped would be a referendum on how politics is practiced may be decided not over questions of protocol and process, but instead over something more basic. After eight long years in the wilderness, Clinton senses that what Democrats want most is victory.

Marc Ambinder is an *Atlantic* associate editor.

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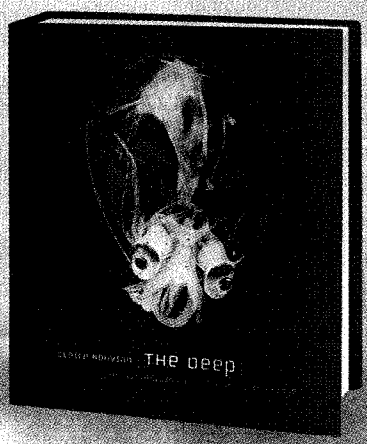

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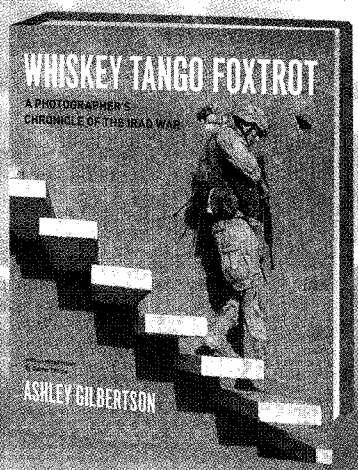

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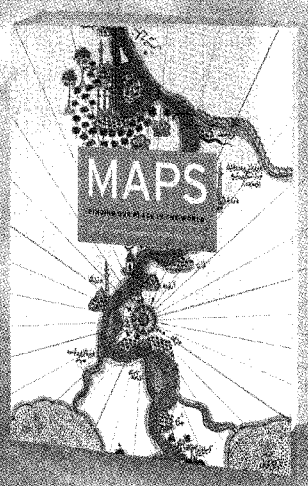

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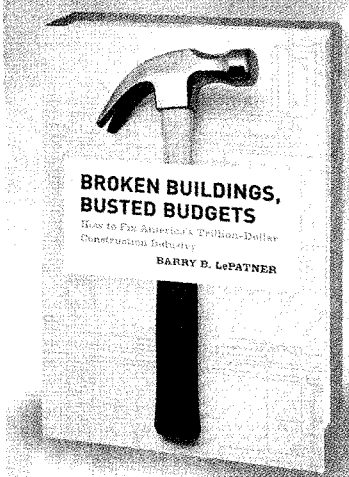

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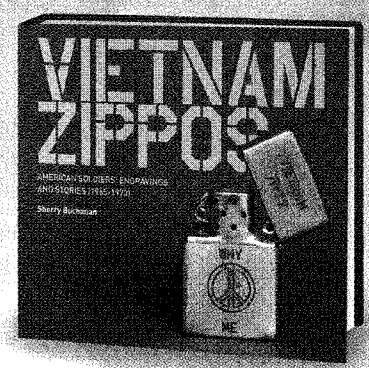

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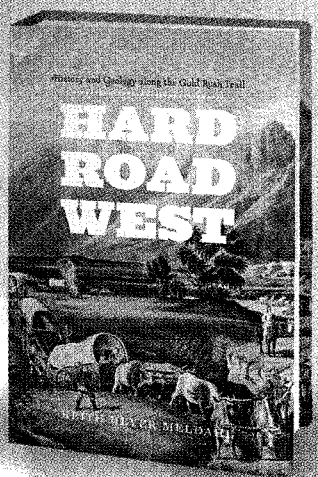

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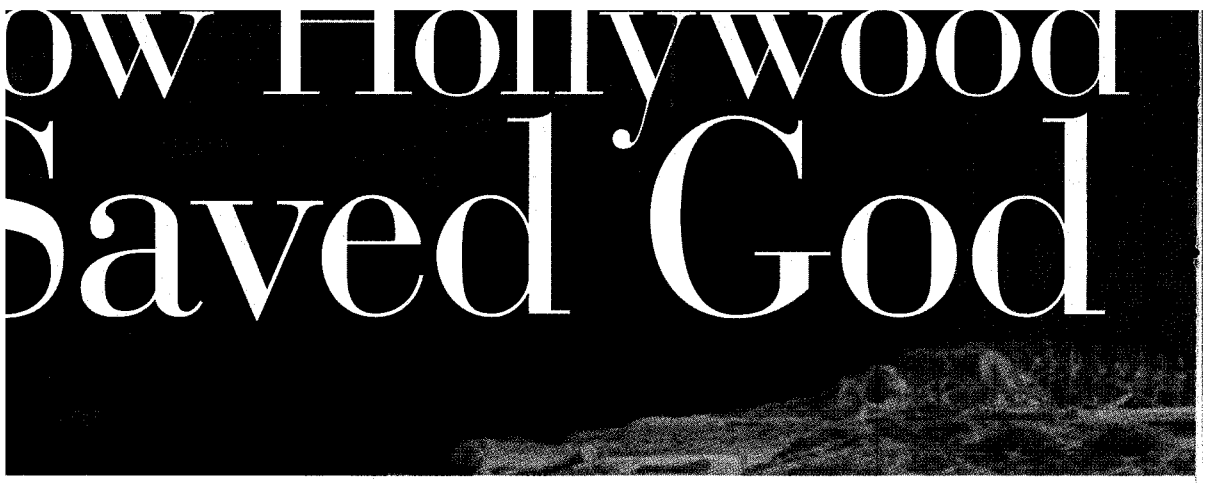

This month, New Line Cinema will release *The Golden Compass*, based on the first book in a trilogy of edgy children's novels written by the British author Philip Pullman. A trailer for the movie evokes *The Lord of the Rings*, and comparisons have been made to *The Chronicles of Narnia*. All three are epic adventures that unfold in a rich fantasy world, perfect for the big screen. But beyond that basic description, the comparisons fall apart. In the past, Pullman has expressed mainly contempt for the books on which the other movies were based. He once dismissed the Lord of the Rings trilogy as an "infantile work" primarily concerned with "maps and plans and languages and codes." Narnia got it even »

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GET ME REWRITE! A bear king on his throne in a scene from *The Golden Compass*.

worse: "Morally loathsome," he called it. "One of the most ugly and poisonous things I've ever read." He described his own series as Narnia's moral opposite. "That's the Christian one," he told me. "And mine is the non-Christian."

Pullman's books have sold 15 million copies worldwide, although it's difficult to imagine adolescent novels any more openly subversive. The series, known collectively as His Dark Materials, centers on Lyra Belacqua, a preteen orphan who's pursued by a murderous institution known as "the Magisterium." Or to use the more familiar name, "the Holy Church." In its quest to eradicate sin, the Church sanctions experiments involving the kidnap and torture of hundreds of children—experiments that separate body from soul and leave the children to stumble around zombie-like, and then die.

The series builds up to a cataclysmic war between Heaven and Earth, on the model of *Paradise Lost* (the source of the phrase *his dark materials*). But in Pullman's version, God is revealed to be a charlatan more pitiable even than Oz. His death scene is memorable only for its lack of drama and dignity: The feeble, demented being, called "the ancient of days," cowers and cries like a baby, dissolving in air. The final book climaxes, so to speak, in a love scene that could rattle the sensibilities of an American culture that tolerates even Girls Gone Wild, because in this case the girl is still a few years away from college. (More on this later.)

Four years ago, before anyone worried about marketing a movie, Pullman wondered why his books hadn't attracted as much controversy as the Harry Potter series—another Hollywood favorite. As he told *The Sydney Morning Herald*, he was "saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God."

In 2001, Pullman became the first author to win the prestigious Whitbread Award for a children's book—*The Amber Spyglass*, the third book in the series. A six-hour London theater production of the books sold out its entire four-month run even before the reviews were published. Many of Pullman's avid adult fans seek out his books because of

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his critique of religion. But they, like his adolescent readers, get drawn into his world by his fantastic imagination.

The series begins in a parallel Oxford, England, at "Jordan College," where the familiar and the fantastic coexist. Lyra is the anti-Disney heroine: an unruly, unteachable orphan cared for by the university's dons who spits and lies her way out of trouble. She cobbles together a family from other brave, reckless cast-offs like herself: a kitchen boy; a young, runaway murderer; gypsies and witches. For a time she finds a surrogate father in Iorek Byrnison, a deposed bear king decked out in metal armor who speeds her through one of several parallel worlds. (As with most fantasies, any attempt to summarize plot and character edges too close to Dungeons & Dragons. Trust me, in the novels it all hangs together.) Her most intimate relationship is with her "daemon," a soul that lives outside the body in animal form. In Lyra's world, a child's daemon can change form—hers can shift rapidly from moth to ermine to rat, depending on her mood—until its companion hits puberty, at which point it settles as a fitting animal. The daemons of the Holy Church functionaries? They tend to be dogs.

To an industry intoxicated with sophisticated visual effects, Pullman's creations were irresistible. In 2003, when describing what sold him on the movie, Toby Emmerich, New Line's president of production, explained, "It was two words: Iorek Byrnison." Iorek is an "insanely awesome character," he added. "He can't tell a lie," Emmerich told me recently, "and [Lyra] is an expert liar." And Hollywood had a precedent in the perfect chemistry between Narnia's little Lucy and the special-effects lion Aslan. (Of course, Aslan is a stand-in for Jesus, while Iorek helps Lyra conquer the forces of God.)

New Line commissioned the first script in 2002. In the five years since—spanning two writers, two directors, and several scripts—the studio has spent enormous energy sorting out exactly how to characterize the villains in the movie.

You can probably guess how things turned out. Given enough time and effort, Hollywood can tweak and polish and recast even the darkest message until it would seem at home in a Fourth of July parade. In the end, the religious meaning of the book was obscured so thoroughly as to be essentially indecipherable. The studio settled on villains that, as Emmerich put it, "feel vaguely kind of like a fascistic, totalitarian dictatorship, Russian/KGB/SS" stew. The movie's main theme became, in one producer's summary, "One small child can save the world." With $180 million at stake, the studio opted to kidnap the book's body and leave behind its soul.

When director Ridley Scott was shooting *Blade Runner*, Philip K. Dick had a feverish, paranoid vision of the filming. He imagined himself seizing leading man Harrison Ford by the throat and "battering him against the wall," he told *The Twilight Zone Magazine* in 1982. He imagined security guards netting him with a blanket and forcing Thorazine on him as he screamed, "You've destroyed my book!"

By that standard, Pullman has remained serene about the translation of his own book to film. In August, I met him in Oxford, where he used to live before too many fans came knocking at his door (he now lives a few miles outside of town). Despite his frequent combative essays in British papers, Pullman in person is an exceedingly amiable man. At 61, he preserves the air of the middle-school teacher he once was. He is tall, with tufts of gray hair and sly, amused eyes. When we met, he wore a rumpled oxford shirt and carried a beat-up leather satchel. It's easy to imagine him meeting dull student questions with the liveliest of answers.

In the past, Pullman has defended the "good faith of the film-makers" and denied any "betrayal." On the surface, his relationship with the studio has remained "cordial," as he put it. The director, Chris Weitz, has made several pilgrimages to Oxford, and the two men exchange e-mails. Pullman got to review a video of the final 50 candidates for the part of Lyra, and he has made script suggestions. Still, the studio publicist seemed nervous when she heard I was going to visit him. All things being equal, Pullman told me, New Line would prefer he were, well, the *late* author of *The Golden Compass*. Dead? "Yes! Absolutely!" If something happened to him, there "would be expressions of the most heartfelt regrets, yet privately they would be saying, 'Thank God.'"

When we met, Pullman had just been to a screening of the film, and he praised many specific scenes. He was thrilled with Dakota Blue Richards, the previously unknown English schoolgirl who plays Lyra. And with Nicole Kidman, whom he described as having the "exact quality of warm and cold, seductive and terrifying" to portray the tender and evil Marisa Coulter. In discussing the film, he chose his words carefully, acknowledging that his role now is to be "sensible" so that the next two films get made. Nonetheless, he was honest about what was missing: "They do know where to put the theology," he said, "and that's off the film."

Long silence. Then, "I think if everything that is made explicit in the book or everything that is implied clearly in the book or everything that can be understood by a close reading of the book were present in the film, they'd have the biggest hit they've ever had in their lives. If they allowed the religious meaning of the book to be fully explicit, it would be a huge hit. Suddenly, they'd have letters of appreciation from people who felt this but never dared say it. They would be the heroes of liberal thought, of freedom of thought ... And it would be the greatest pity if that didn't happen.

"I didn't put that very well. What I mean is that I want this film to succeed in every possible way. And what I

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don't want to do, you see, is talk the other two films out of existence. So I'll stop there."

Pullman has expressed admiration for Richard Dawkins, a fellow British atheist. Like him, Pullman views the prevailing forms of religion as destructive and oppressive forces in history. "Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him," he once said. But his views are not as coldly antiseptic as Dawkins's. He grew up going to Sunday school and has only fond memories of serving as a choirboy in his grandfather's rural Anglican parish. One of Pullman's favorite subjects is the moral power of stories, and he can sound preacher-like when he addresses it. "'Thou shalt not' might reach the head, but it takes 'Once upon a time' to reach the heart," he once wrote. Pullman's own books are full of the mysticism and grandeur often associated with religion, which is no doubt part of their appeal. "We need joy, we need a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives, we need a connection with the universe, we need all the things the Kingdom of Heaven used to promise us but failed to deliver," he said in a 2000 speech.

All things being equal, Pullman told me, New Line would prefer he were, well, the *late* author of *The Golden Compass.*

When pressed, Pullman grants that he's not really trying to kill God, but rather the outdated idea of God as an old guy with a beard in the sky. In his novels, he replaces the idea of God with "Dust," made up of invisible particles that begin to cluster around people when they hit puberty. The Church believes Dust to be the physical evidence of original sin and hopes to eradicate it. But over the course of the series, Pullman reveals it to be the opposite: evidence of human consciousness, a kind of godlike energy that surrounds everyone. People accumulate Dust by "thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on." It starts to build up around puberty because, for Pullman, sexual awakening triggers the beginning of self-knowledge and intellectual curiosity. To him, the loss of sexual innocence is not a tragedy; it's the springboard to a productive and virtuous adulthood.

The most curious aspect of Pullman's theology is the primacy he places on teen sexuality; like the best heavy-metal songs, the whole series builds up to a celebration of losing your virginity, or at least getting to first base. In *The Amber Spyglass*, a former nun turned physicist guides Lyra to her destiny using clues from the *I Ching*. The physicist divines that she should tell Lyra the story of when she was 12 years old at a birthday party and a boy "took a bit of marzipan and he just gently put it in my mouth," and she fell in love.

This simple story sets off salvation. When she hears it, Lyra "felt something strange happen to her body. She felt a stirring at the roots of her hair: she found herself breathing faster." (At least that's what she felt in the British edition; the American version leaves these lines out.) A few scenes later, Lyra, alone in the woods with her friend Will, lifts a little red fruit "gently to his mouth." They bump together clumsily, and Will is soon described, in terms familiar to *Playboy* readers, "kissing her hot face over and over again, drinking in with adoration the scent of her body," his nerves "ablaze." What happens next is not entirely clear. The scene is intended as a rewriting of Genesis, with Lyra replaying the role of Eve, so presumably some nakedness is required. But she and Will are still several years shy of 18, which might make the scene's fullest implication illegal in some states. When critics accused Pullman of sanctioning underage sex, he said: "Nowhere in the book do I talk about anything more than a kiss. And as a child, a kiss is enough. A kiss can change the world." What the novel says is, "Around them there was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath." When they return from the woods, after an ambiguous gap in the narrative, holding hands and "oblivious to everything else," all is suddenly well with the world: "The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all."

"This is exactly what happens in the Garden of Eden," Pullman told me. "They become aware of sexuality, of the power the body has to attract attention from someone else. This is not only natural, but a wonderful thing! To be celebrated! Why the Christian Church has spent 2,000 years condemning this glorious moment, well, that's a mystery. I want to confront that, I suppose, by telling a story that this so-called original sin is anything but. It's the thing that makes us fully human."

Pullman gets annoyed whenever he recalls a passage in C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia: In the final book of the series, Lewis excludes Susan Pevensie, the oldest sister, from what is essentially Paradise because she is "interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick

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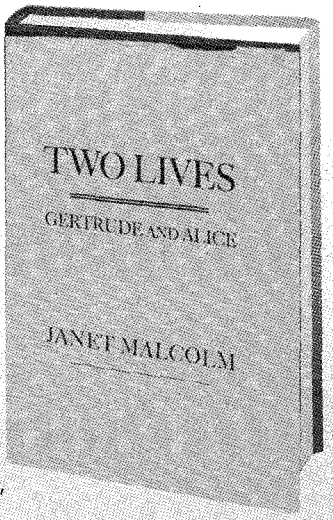

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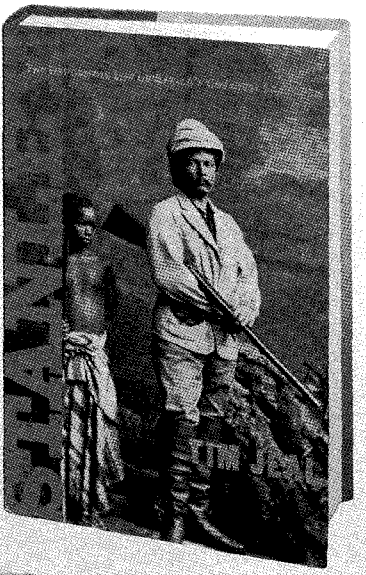

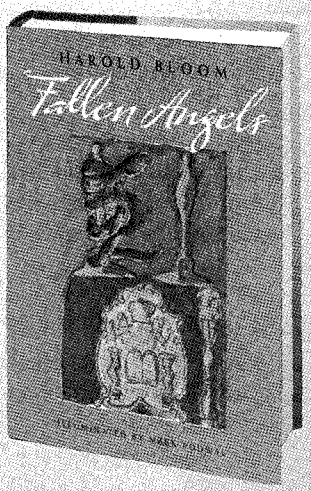

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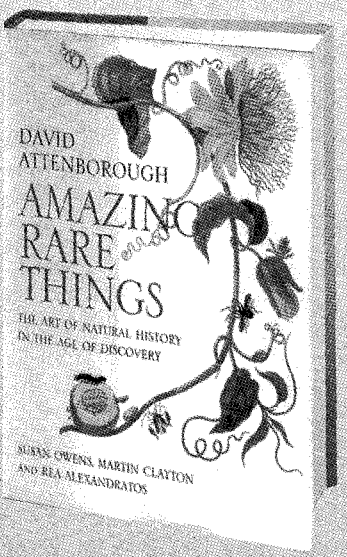

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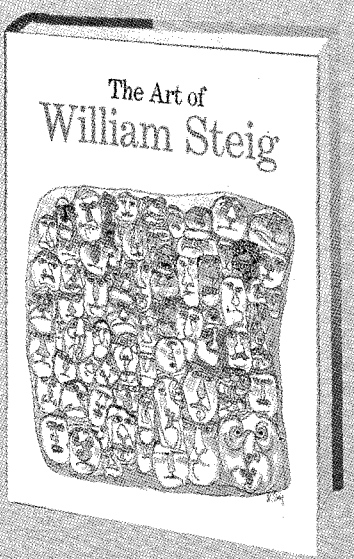

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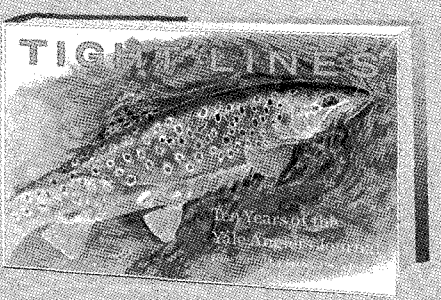

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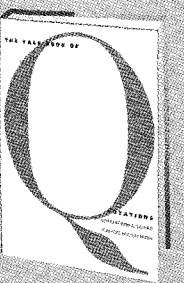

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and invitations." Pullman, in an essay called "The Dark Side of Narnia," cites this as evidence that Lewis disliked women and sexuality and was "frightened and appalled at the notion of wanting to grow up."

The Narnia series, in his view, embraces a worldview that comes close to "life-hating ideology"—punishing, misogynistic, racist, and death-obsessed. By contrast, his own books are filled with a kind of warmth, an exuberance for finding utopia in this life. When he loses patience with his Christian critics, he lists the values he promotes in his own stories: tolerance, love, kindness, courage, duty, individual freedom over blind obedience. The series ends with Lyra realizing she has to return to her world and separate from Will. She is heartbroken, but accepts that this is the only way she can fulfill her ultimate destiny, which is to help build the "Republic of Heaven." She understands this to be a paradise on Earth where she can learn to be "kind and curious and patient," and where she can rely on her own knowledge and wisdom, not the mandates of God or the Magisterium. This reads as a moment of heroic idealism, one that not so subtly mocks the whole notion of a Kingdom of Heaven that rules and oppresses us while we live, and from which we are excluded until after we die.

In 2002, New Line commissioned the English playwright Tom Stoppard to write the screenplay for *The Golden Compass*. As a playwright, Stoppard is drawn to the dark and philosophical. His biggest success in Hollywood came from co-writing a comedy (*Shakespeare in Love*), which *The Golden Compass* is decidedly not. So New Line should not have been surprised by the outcome. In its choice of villains, Stoppard's script stays relatively faithful to Pullman. The script introduces Father MacPhail, an odious clergyman with a lizard daemon, who in a later book tries to kill Lyra. In intermittent scenes, MacPhail and other clerics gather to discuss Dust and heresy. Stoppard told *The New York Times* that he turned in the script in 2003 and didn't hear back from the studio for quite some time. Ultimately, New Line decided the script was "too intellectual," and "not Lyra-centric enough." Stoppard "was interested in the discussions between old men with beards," Pullman told me, "and those discussions are only important in how they affect Lyra."

In 2004, while it was sitting on Stoppard's script, the studio received an unsolicited 40-page adaptation plan from the screenwriter and director Chris Weitz. Given his résumé, Weitz was an unlikely candidate. He was best known for directing, with his brother, Paul, the raunchy teenage comedy *American Pie*. He also co-directed and co-wrote *About a Boy* (based on the Nick Hornby novel), which was nominated for an Oscar for best adapted screenplay. Although *The Golden Compass* was on an entirely different scale, Weitz made a convincing case for himself. He wrote that he, too, had attended an "Oxbridge College," in his case, Trinity College, Cambridge, where he'd studied 17th-century literature and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. A friend had given Pullman's books to Weitz while he was filming *About a Boy*, and when he imagined them onscreen, they seemed to him "everything I loved about moviemaking." He loved the combination of epic adventure and coming-of-age story; in the books, the drama comes as much from Lyra's learning her true identity as it does from the battle scenes. He loved that the hero was a girl who was stubborn and defiant. And he loved that even the battles seemed beautiful and elegant, not "bunches of armies hacking at each other." The studio reportedly called Stoppard and told him not to do any more work on the script.

Weitz got the job as writer and director, and immediately set out to prove to Pullman's devoted fan base that he deserved it. In December 2004, before he'd started filming, Weitz did a Q&A with bridgetothestars.net, the main Pullman fan site. Weitz was intelligent, expansive, self-deprecating, and honest. The interview turned out to be a fiasco:

> BRIDGETOTHESTARS.NET: Do you think any of the more controversial aspects of HDM (like the portrayal of religion) will be toned down or removed altogether?
>
> CHRIS WEITZ: Here we are at the heart of the matter. This will certainly be the issue that will ignite the most controversy amongst fans and amongst the general public ...
>
> New Line is a company that makes films for economic returns. You would hardly expect them to be anything else. They have expressed worry about the possibility of HDM's perceived antireligiosity making it an unviable project financially ... Needless to say, all my best efforts will be directed towards keeping HDM as liberating and iconoclastic an experience as I can. But there may be some modification of terms. You will probably not hear of the "Church" but you will hear of the Magisterium. Those who will understand will understand. I have no desire to change the nature or intentions of the villains of the piece, but they may appear in more subtle guises.

"Economic returns." "Unviable project financially." This is not the kind of boardroom blather a fan committed to the darkest side of His Dark Materials wants to hear. The message boards quickly soured on Weitz. "Like it or lump it, Pullman's atheism is an integral part of his novels," one fan wrote. "I'm led to assume that Weitz isn't currently pursuing a career in spin only because he's crap

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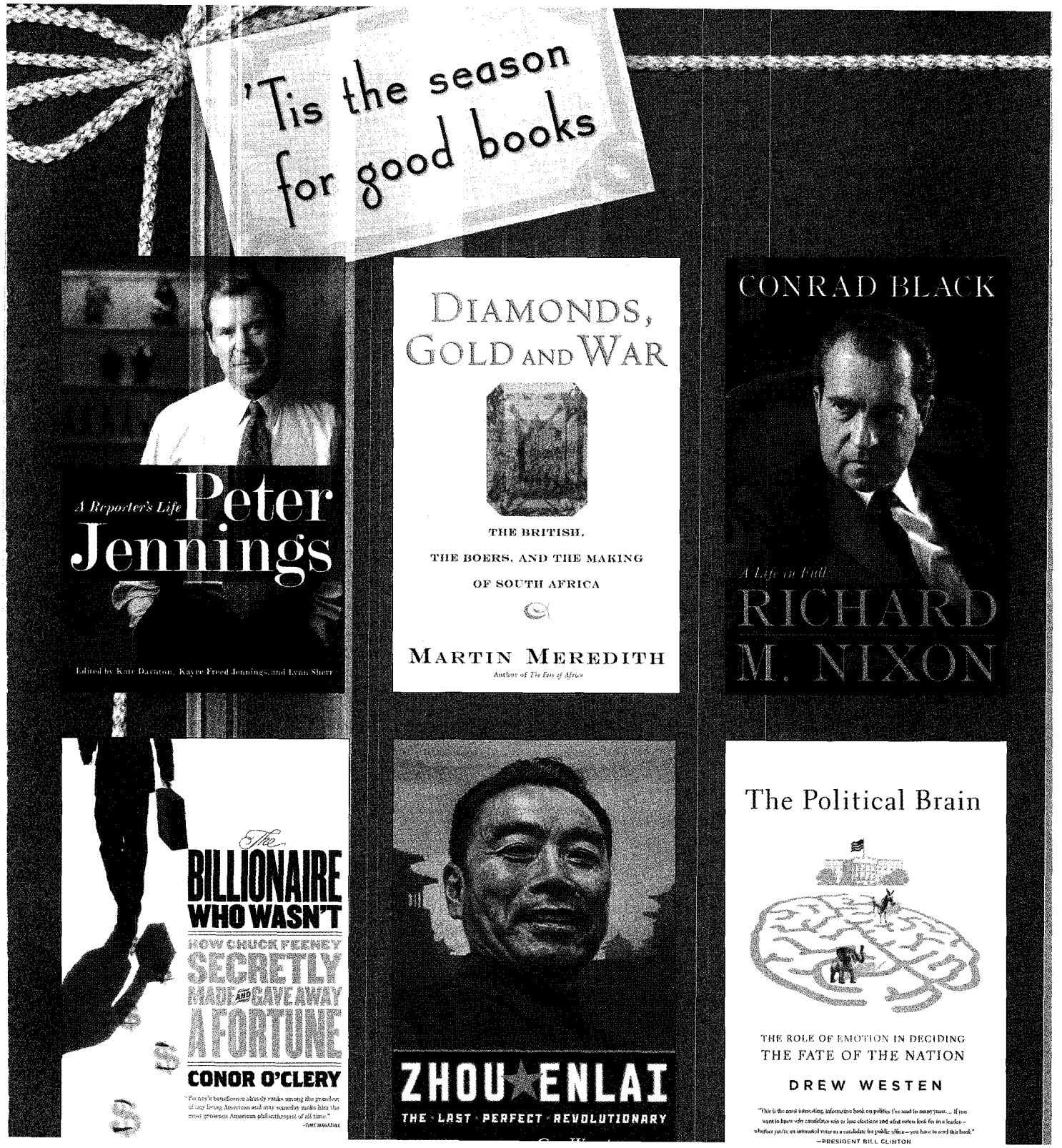

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at it," sneered another. *The Times* of London ran a story headlined "God Is Cut From Film of Dark Materials."

Weitz had believed that his (safe) take on Pullman's theology—the Magisterium represents an oppressive theocracy or a totalitarian state, not religion in general—was widely shared. He hadn't quite realized that the loudest part of Pullman's fan base regarded that interpretation as a cop-out. These fans were committed to the broader interpretation of the villain's identity as God himself. In their defense, Pullman does spell this out rather unambiguously, for those who missed the earlier hints, in the final book: "The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all names he gave himself."

Weitz told me that after reading the *Times* story, he went into a cold sweat. "Why am I doing this?" he remembered thinking. "I'll end up being hated by the fans and ripped into by the press. And this is a huge, huge endeavor. Maybe this isn't for me." All of a sudden, he felt overwhelmed by all of it: the visual effects, the cost and scope of the project. Only a short time after Weitz got his dream directing job, he backed out of it.

In 2005, the studio hired the British director Anand Tucker, best known for directing *Shopgirl*. In under a year, Tucker too was gone ("Creative differences," the studio said). New Line persuaded Weitz, who'd stayed on as screenwriter, to become the director again. By then, he told me, "I'd started to care less about what people might think of me." Besides, he added, "This thing about the books being antireligion is a bit of a canard. They are, in fact, very spiritual."

Studios usually try to maintain good relations with authors, especially when an author has a large fan base. When Weitz came back to the project, he took comfort in an e-mail exchange he had with Pullman. He had asked him whether a "version that wasn't superficially so much a critique of organized dogmatic religions would fly with him," and Pullman, Weitz reported, "didn't seem particularly bothered by that."

Pullman has at times offered up a similar interpretation of his work, calling Soviet Russia, for example, a form of theocracy: "They start with a Holy Book that's inerrant, in that case the writings of Marx," he told me. "They have doctors of the 'Church,' and a priesthood that has privileges not afforded to common people. They have a teleological view of history moving inexorably to a certain point. They have demons, who are called traitors. So are there examples of the Magisterium in the secular world? Of course." But when I asked whether he considered this a limited interpretation of his views and not the "heart of the matter," he smiled mischievously and suggested I put down, "Pullman nodded enthusiastically."

The heart of the matter is introduced at the end of the first book and is critical to the progression of the rest of the series. It was in the earliest versions of the movie script, but over time it has been slowly erased. In the book, Lord Asriel, an enigmatic explorer, lectures Lyra on the story of Adam and Eve. In Lyra and Asriel's world, the story goes: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to reveal the true form of one's daemon, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat."

According to Western religions, human history began with the Creation. But the cruel world as we know it began with the moment when Eve ate the fruit and then gave it to Adam. This is the Fall, which brought on sin and suffering. Adam and Eve were cursed by God and expelled from Eden. (The full consequences of their act are laid out in a photo display at the new creationist museum in Kentucky: viruses, death, war, concentration camps, and starvation in Sudan.) Asriel is unsettled by this interpretation of history. Over time, witches reveal that Lyra's destiny is to replay the Eve story and undo original sin. Lyra fulfills this destiny in the third novel when she does whatever she does with Will. For the purpose of streamlining the plot, the reversed Eve story is perfect: simple, elegant, and accessible. And, as Pullman points out, it "comes at the point in the story when we most need that explanation." But no $180 million movie is going to trash the first book of the Bible, so the movie will have to do without it.

The earlier scripts made passing reference to the Fall. In the Stoppard script, Asriel, in a rage about the Authority, mocks the "apple of desire" and the "fig-leaf of shame"; a few scenes later Coulter, the evil Nicole Kidman character, yells at Asriel, "You can't conquer God!" Weitz told me he'd originally written an opening scene showing Lyra in a college chapel listening to a sermon about the alternative Genesis, "but that movie was not going to get made." A Weitz script dated December 2004 makes no explicit reference to Genesis. Instead, the theology is mediated entirely through a discussion of Dust, which, according to your taste, is either more highbrow or just more muddled. Asriel tells Lyra that people believe Dust is sin and that it brings on misery. He says he will set out to destroy Dust and essentially reverse the consequences of original sin: "When I do—pain, sin, suffering—*death itself* will die."

The final, shooting script includes no mention of sin or the end of death. As Emmerich told me, Dust is "akin to the Force" in *Star Wars*. Coulter tells Lyra that Dust is "evil and wicked" and makes people "sick." Asriel sounds like Obi-Wan Kenobi: "They taught themselves to fear Dust, instead of *master* it," he says. "They've ignored a tremendous source of power ... That is what it all comes down to, Lyra. *That* is what Dust is. *Power*. Without it, we are like children before the might of the Magisterium."

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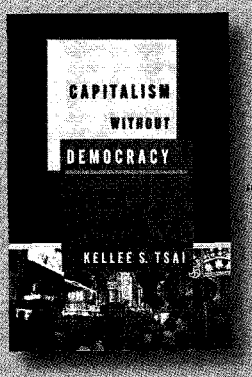

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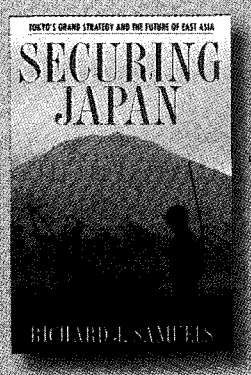

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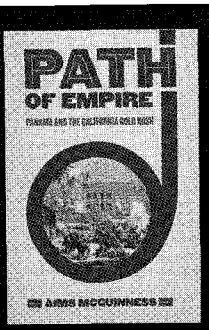

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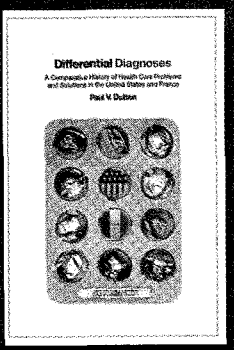

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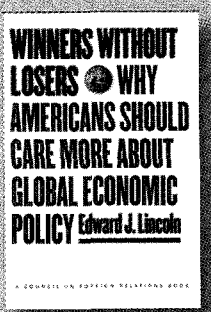

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It may make sense if you're in a dark room dazzled by special effects and not thinking too hard. Then again, maybe it won't. What's left of Pullman's story is a string of disconnected proclamations that obscure not just his original point, but any point at all: "*Master* Dust!" "Freedom is at stake!" "We're not alone. We're never alone! We have each other." They satisfy, but they don't really explain. Or perhaps they offer explanations so familiar and straightforward that they don't invite questions.

This is Hollywood at its most hazily indignant and self-congratulatory, recycling the generic theme of *Victory, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Dead Poets Society,* and countless other films—a band of grubby, half-crazed heroes takes on the System and wins. When I talked to Weitz in August, he expected that he would still be tinkering with the opening voice-over until just before the release, but the general direction was already set. New Line's publicity materials describe it this way: "One child stands between the end of free will and the beginning of a new age. Lyra Belacqua ... is only 12, but even she knows that doing what you're told versus doing what you feel is right can yield very different outcomes." The message is nominally loyal to Pullman, but it also fetishizes the power of childlike innocence—which is one of his greatest complaints about religion.

Weitz told me he tried to keep in a line where Asriel says, "Dust is sin," but "that didn't make it. What can I say?" Hollywood "is just terrified that anything that brings up religion or anything controversial will be disastrous." But after three years of working on the movie, he'd come up with a solid explanation for why he's not selling out: In the '80s and '90s, Hollywood was "scornful in a very intellectually unsound way about religion. Any priest or nun was a dogmatic idiot. So I think there's something valid in the way the Christian community has responded."

There will be some religious imagery in the movie, Weitz said, but it will be blended so unobtrusively into the production design that it will take a "DVD player and working knowledge of Latin to decipher the symbols." Outside the Magisterium buildings will be icons of Orthodox saints. Sprinkled around the movie will be Latin inscriptions from the Vulgate translation of the Bible, including one in Mrs. Coulter's bedroom that refers to eating from the tree of good and evil. "Kind of a little joke between me and me," Weitz told me.

Movies that deeply offend Christian sensibilities do get made from time to time: *The Last Temptation of Christ, Dogma,* and, last year, *The Da Vinci Code,* a major Sony release. The last one lends credence to Pullman's idea that a faithful translation of his books could have been commercially viable. It's possible that New Line's executives once thought so too. New Line, after all, has a reputation for picking up edgy projects, like *Boogie Nights* and *Se7en*. When the studio bought the rights to *The Golden Compass*, in 2002, it was flush with the success of *The Lord of the Rings,* and perhaps its leadership imagined making something less anodyne. If so, a more nervous mood has since prevailed. Pullman's books never had as large a following in the United States as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. And with shape-shifting daemons in most scenes and the armored bear in several, the movie's production costs were enormous. New Line's interim projects, meanwhile, met with mixed success. The studio reportedly has tense relations with its parent company, Time Warner, and may be in danger of losing its independence. That's a lot of pressure, which would naturally lead you to call on the Force.

With $180 million at stake, the studio opted to kidnap the book's body and leave behind its soul.

Despite all of New Line's efforts, the movie may still be received as offensive in some communities, if only because of its association with the book. Catholic League, a watchdog group that monitors portrayals of the Catholic Church in the media, has printed thousands of copies of a 23-page booklet called "Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked," which it plans to distribute to reviewers and religious groups. "I don't want Christians to be seduced by the idea that this is a great fairy-tale story to show your kids at Christmastime," says Bill Donohue, the group's president. "This is Hitchens taken to the kids," he adds, referring to Christopher Hitchens, author of the best seller *God Is Not Great*. Donohue knows that the moviemakers decided on a "dumbed down" version of the villains, but he still plans to call for a boycott. "It's a backdoor way of selling atheism," he says. "Unsuspecting parents will take little Johnny to see the movie. Johnny likes the movie. Johnny gets the trilogy for Christmas."

But these days Hollywood just doesn't make for a satisfying enemy in the culture war. After the amazing success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ,* in 2004, studios have at times tried to win over what they initially saw as an untapped Christian market. They've arranged press junkets for Christian journalists and hired marketers to reach out to

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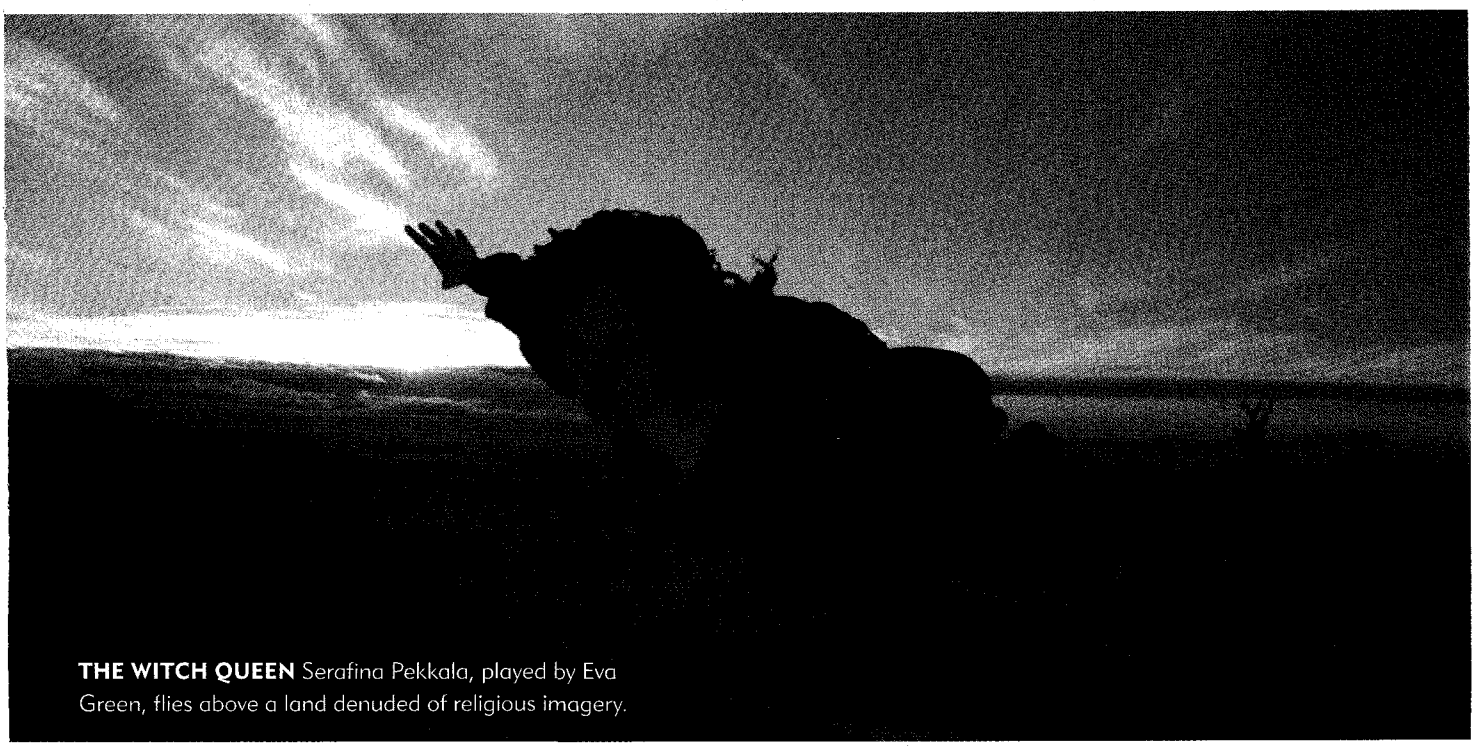
churches. (New Line made a bid with *The Nativity Story* in 2006, a prequel to *The Passion*. It bombed.) Right now, the love affair is in limbo. After a rocky start, the studios now seem to view the Christian market as it would a difficult girlfriend: elusive and hard to please; ultimately, you keep your distance but still take pains not to irritate her.

Marketing plans aside, New Line executives likely believe they were doing Pullman no great disservice by stripping out his theology and replacing it with some vague derivative of the Force. Values such as obedience, religious devotion, and chastity are so rare in Hollywood's culture that they probably seem archaic and quaint—courtly rules that no one lives by anyway. Certainly not something to get exercised over.

Pity poor Green. This may have been her mangled attempt to follow orders. At the festival, the studio had delivered a sheet of talking points to the hotel room of at least one cast member, Sam Elliott, who plays a Texas aeronaut in the film. According to Elliott, the talking points instructed that if the question of Pullman's religious views came up, the actors should just "avoid it and play stupid." The message they all agreed on was something along the lines of, "How can I possibly tell what Pullman had in mind?"

Still, Green's reply, with its unintended flashes of id, rang with a certain Hollywood authenticity. This could be Paris Hilton reading her Bible in prison. Or Madonna preaching about Kabbalah. You can almost see Pullman cringing at the standard Tinseltown crypto-Buddhist babble. Be Spiritual. Praise the Divine. Offend No One. Then say, Ommmm.



THE WITCH QUEEN Serafina Pekkala, played by Eva Green, flies above a land denuded of religious imagery.

At the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, in a press conference with cast members of *The Golden Compass*, a reporter asked if there was any pressure to tone down the anti-Christian elements of the story. It fell to the young Eva Green, the former Bond girl who plays the beautiful witch queen Serafina Pekkala, to answer.

"I don't know. I don't know. I can't ans— I don't know what it's going to be like. But, um, religion is present; you can't avoid it; it's going to be there. People are going to be, 'Oh, my God.' You don't know. It's a very tricky subject. Chris [Weitz] can answer that. I don't want to ... say something bad."

When pushed about the book's "subversive elements," she said: "It's very metaphysical, philosophical, about God—but not in a bad way. You know people love 'Oh, my God, it's anti-Christian.' It's not at all; it's highly spiritual."

Hollywood is in somewhat the same position as Las Vegas these days. It went from being the capital of sin to Disneyland, and now it's landed somewhere in between. It tries to keep the sins hidden away and outwardly present itself as a defender of American virtues: justice, individual freedom, and the power of one innocent soul to save the world. *The Golden Compass* should not offend, or be controversial at all, Weitz swears. It will certainly not, heaven forbid, offer any critique of religion. "The movie's first job is to beguile the audience for a couple of hours," he says, and that much it can promise to do.

Hanna Rosin is an *Atlantic* contributing editor and the author of *God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America*, published in September.

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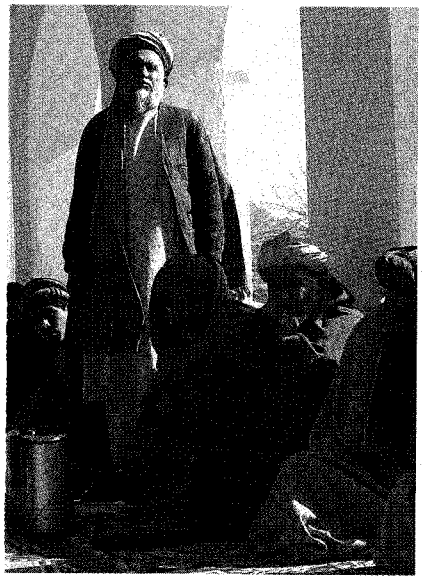
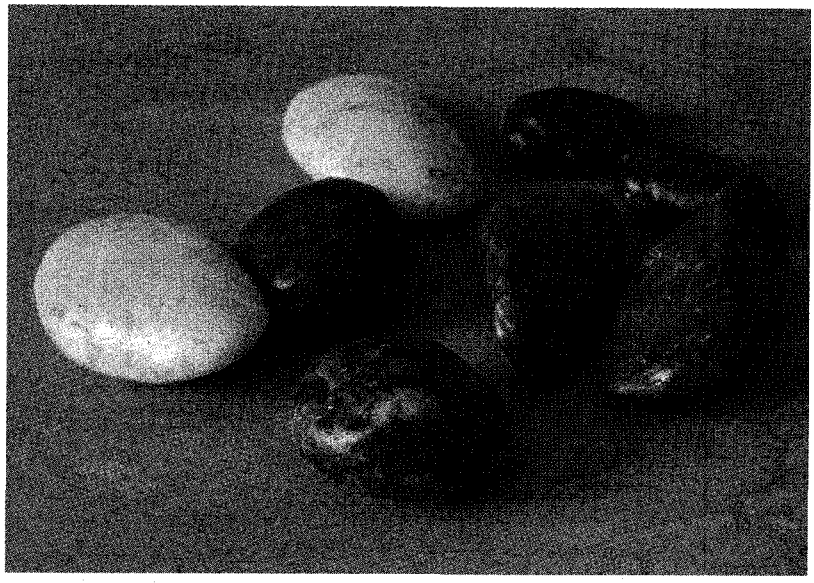
How the author helped Afghans build a thriving soap and body-oil business—and overcame the incompetence of America's aid establishment





BY SARAH CHAYES

Scents & Sensibility

You could take the man for a Talib, in his flowing Afghan garb, six or seven yards of black silk looped around his head, beard untrimmed, eyes now politely cast down as we spoke, now focused on his glass of tea, now off to his left somewhere—anywhere but looking at me, a barefaced woman who speaks to men directly in their language. The man »

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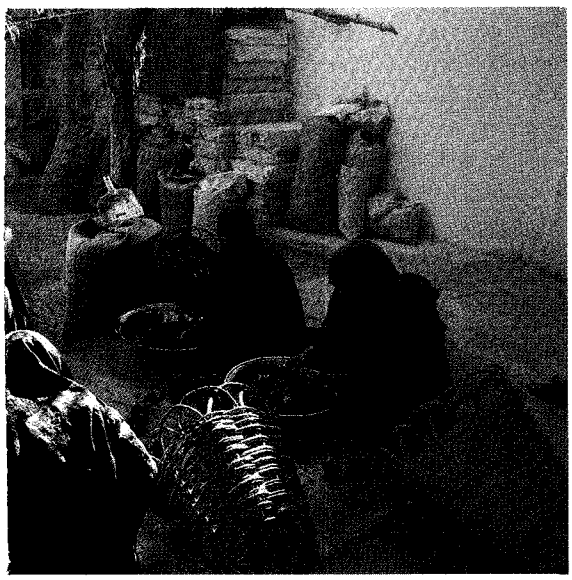
was no Talib; he was my friend Kabir's uncle, who cultivates black cumin on a highland plateau that lies across two ridges of bony rock north of Kandahar. What wafted in with him was not the distinctive astringent smell of cumin but the heady perfume of the flower we had asked him to gather, so we could distill its essential oil. It's called *Salvia spinosa*, and it smells like ripe bananas doused in lime. How the unforgiving dust of southern Afghanistan produces such miracles remains one of the mysteries of the place for me.

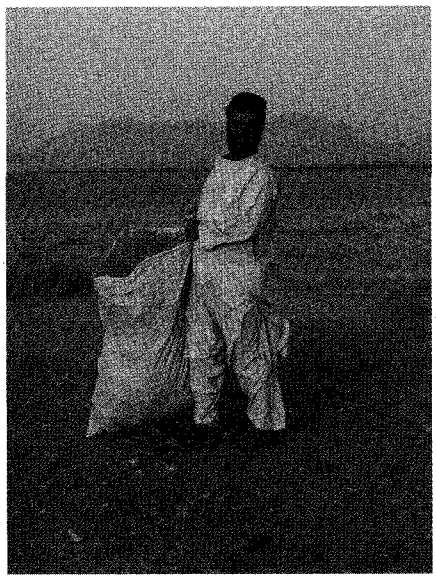
I was trying to push 600 afghanis, or about $12, on Kabir's uncle for the 30 pounds or so of flowers he had brought. It would have cost him half a day to comb the wheat fields, plus an hour and a half's ride in a jolting open-backed truck to Kandahar. He delicately picked up the bills and placed them a little closer to me on the carpet where we sat. "I didn't do this for money," he protested. I cut him short, knowing the value of those bills to him. Three days' wages for unskilled labor: men who stand in the bazaar in the morning, shovels across their shoulders. For Kabir's uncle, a windfall he could calculate in rice, kilos of tea, meat for children. "If I came to your home hungry or had been wounded, you could tend me out of friendship," I told him. "But this is business. Work should be recompensed."

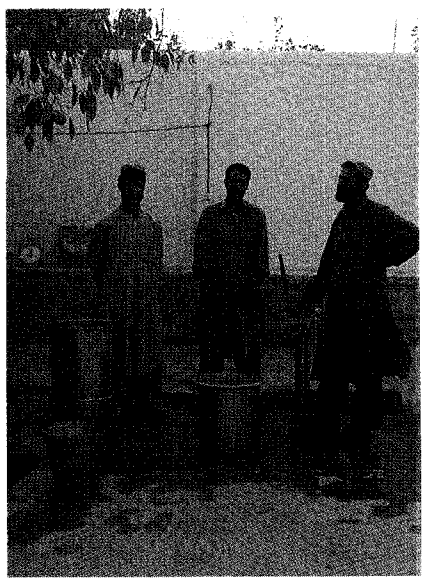
It took about half an hour, but I brought him round. He folded the money and tucked it away, then promised to plant *Salvia spinosa* for us next year. It grows wild in the upland fields; crones grind up the shiny seeds and use them in poultices for eye irritations, but no Afghan farmer would think to cultivate the stuff, for up till now there has been no market for it.

This is what we do: Eleven Afghan men and women and I scour this harried land for its (licit) bounties and turn them into beauty products. Our soaps, colored with local vegetable dyes and hand-molded and smoothed till they look like lumps of marble, and our oils, elixirs for polishing the skin, sell in boutiques that cater to the pampered in New York, Montreal, and San Francisco.

The scale of the effort—we sell about $2,500 worth of soap per month—is tiny. Still, our business, the Arghand Cooperative, represents what reports and think tanks say places like Afghanistan need: sustainable economic development. And it is almost entirely the product of private enthusiasm and generosity. From the institutional donors whose job I naively thought was to foster initiatives like ours, we have reaped much travail but almost no support.







FAREWELL TO ALMS: The Arghand Cooperative helps provide a livelihood for Afghan villagers and farmers near Kandahar.

SARAH CHAYES

I did not come naturally by my soap-factory-in-a-shooting-gallery. After covering the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 for National Public Radio, I decided that Afghanistan was the place to get off the reporting treadmill, as rewarding as it had been. It's not just that I fell in love with the country—though I did—not just that I felt a perplexing sense of ease in this harsh, impoverished, chauvinistic, explosively independent land. My decision had broader underpinnings. In the wake of 9/11, getting Afghanistan right seemed terribly important—important to the direction history would take in the 21st century. Slogans urged us to cut up the world into two opposing blocs, to align ourselves with one or the other of two irrevocably hostile civilizations. That thinking would get us nowhere, I was convinced.

What better place than Kandahar to give in to the nudgings of a conscience that had been telling me for some time: "Stop *talking* about it already—*do something*."

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And so I decided to stay in Afghanistan, at least partly to see how I would do if confronted with the requirement to produce a visible difference. Before the soap factory, I set up the headquarters in Kandahar of a maverick nongovernmental organization, founded by President Hamid Karzai's older brother Qayum, then spent six months running a dairy cooperative. On Wednesdays, I would count out the money for our hundred or so participating farmers, whose children, jockeying adult-sized bikes over lumpy dirt roads, would carry milk to our truck in a riot of receptacles. We had a kitten that loved to roll around in the grubby bills, their condition itself a testament to the grim local economy: Torn notes worth even 5 or 10 cents were sewn or stapled back together.

I started thinking about soap in late 2004, on a breather from Afghanistan. I visited a natural-soap company in New Hampshire. The factory turned out to be one lady—albeit a chemist—mixing oils in her kitchen. I felt the first thrill of possibility: *God, I can do that.* What struck me about this cottage business was that the soaps, "handcrafted in New Hampshire," were composed of oils and lye from all over the globe that were ordered online and delivered to a garage apartment near Concord. An Afghan version of this business could stand out by producing its own raw materials, not just stirring somebody else's together. Turn over a bar of luxury soap and read the ingredients; half of the items can be found in Afghanistan: apricot kernels, sweet almonds, castor beans, fragrant seeds like cumin and anise. There was a pomegranate craze on. Surely I could squeeze pomegranates into soap somehow ...

In fact, the startling abundance of fruit in parched Kandahar was what had first led me to consider beauty products. Before leaving the dairy cooperative, I had met with the elders of the village where we bought most of our milk, set in a leafy pomegranate forest that stands out from the surrounding dun, rocky moonscape. The elders gathered on a patch of plastered ground between the adobe houses, accompanied by gawking children. Milk is all very well and good, the men said. But it brings only pocket change. What we really need is a market for our grapes and pomegranates.

Fresh fruit is heavy and perishable, hardly the export for a country lacking roads, electricity, and any notion of international hygiene standards. But skin-care products don't bruise or go bad, and in the West the market for them has exploded. All I had to do was figure out how to work the necessary magic on Kandahar's fruit.

And so I hopped on the Internet and typed "seed oil" and "essential oil still" into the search engine. How exactly do you turn an almond, or a rose blossom, into oil? What's an alembic? A "sap value"?

Just as it has revolutionized every other aspect of life, the Internet has transformed the prospect of doing good. Within days I learned that oil is pressed out of nuts and seeds—coffee beans, even—by the action of a spiraling screw inside a cylinder. I knew that pomegranate seeds, though containing only about 5 percent oil, could be pressed. "Essential oil," which provides fragrance, is a different thing entirely. It is leached out of fresh plant material by steam forced through a pierced canister filled with leaves or flowers, in much the way a stove-top espresso pot makes coffee. The Internet became my Ariadne, leading me through botanical lore, market prices for nut oils, paintings of pomegranates. And it led me to the German company that manufactured the seed press I bought—a hand-cranked model that was perfect for electricity-starved Kandahar.

I decided to stay in Afghanistan, at least partly to see how I would do if confronted with the requirement to produce a visible difference.

The Internet also wove together the far-flung community that has nurtured our cooperative. Without it, I'm not sure we could have survived. The oddly intimate communication that e-mail opens between perfect strangers facilitates the type of direct interaction I wanted. I learned a lot, for example, about the distributor for that seed-oil press: an elderly gentleman who, after an adventurous career in the petroleum industry, bought a ranch in Colorado, and then retired (again) home to Germany and the seed-oil business. In our e-mails, I've taken to addressing him as OMOTM, for Old Man of the Mountains, and he calls me Little Lady. Because we had become cyber-pals, Gary Stadler, who builds our essential-oil stills, once filled spaces in shipping crates with dish towels, caustic-chemical gloves, disposable eyedroppers, and glass pipettes. To stay in touch with our board of directors (whose members are spread from Kandahar and Kabul to Massachusetts and San Francisco, through Kansas City, Austin, Denver), we have built Internet communication and voting procedures into our bylaws. A wish list is posted on our Web site, allowing supporters to pick out and send us items they know we need, rather than just write a check.

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But none of these developments was the least foreseeable when, in late April 2005, nursing an acute case of anxiety, I boarded an Air France flight to Dubai, final destination Kabul. I had been away for seven months. I was going to ask three former employees of mine to quit the well-paying jobs I had found for them on a U.S. military base; counting their families, the livelihoods of about 15 people would now be in my charge. And with zero experience, I was going to try to create a product for which conventional wisdom said the market was saturated. To launch this venture, I had $25,000 from a private foundation in Chicago, and a single collaborator back in the United States—a 16-year-old high-school student from outside Boston named Mari Oye. My mother and most of my friends thought I was out of my mind.

Reentry was eased by the recent appointment of my dearest Afghan friend as chief of the Kabul police. One day he called to ask if I needed a car. A jolt of gratitude shot through me. *Did I ever!* His chief of staff ushered me to a brown Toyota Corolla, in which I proceeded to tootle around the Afghan capital, trying to drum up support for my would-be soap factory.

From another friend, Andres Judeh, I got joyous encouragement. A plump Palestinian from Bolivia, bearded after the local fashion, he is the sort of development worker Afghanistan could use a thousand of: energetic and inventive, with the courage to travel the hinterland, as well as the understanding that it is up to him to unearth possibilities, rather than wait for them to come knocking. He was working for a contractor implementing a major project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID.

"You want to process fruit into value-added products?" he summarized. "Greeaaaat ideeea!" Having put himself through college making jam, Andres had faith in my plans to cook up preserves for the local market, using the flesh of the apricots, whose kernels we would press for oil, and the ruby-red part of the pomegranate seed, from which we needed only the hard white center. But he had some doubts about soap. Unfortunately for my dreams of swift institutional backing, he couldn't go near a project based in Kandahar. His area of operation was in the west.

Andres suggested I turn instead to the Alternative Livelihoods Program (ALP). Funded by USAID, the project is, according to the agency's Web site, a "major component of the U.S. and Government of Afghanistan's comprehensive Counter-Narcotics Strategy." The idea behind ALP is to compete with the ubiquitous opium poppy by promoting other ways for rural folk to make a living. The match seemed perfect. Our cooperative's main objective was to find new, profitable uses for more of southern Afghanistan's traditional agricultural and botanical products. The more reliably farmers could earn money from legal crops—especially ones with a higher market value than wheat or watermelons—the less likely they were to have recourse to risky and religiously taboo opium. Full of hope, I approached ALP.

As I was to learn over the next two bewildering years, the Alternative Livelihoods Program exemplifies the disturbing evolution of the international development industry. With neither the staff nor the mobility to carry out or even fully monitor the projects it supports, USAID acts strictly as a moneybag. Though it does fund nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations dedicated to humanitarian action, many American development dollars go to huge for-profit companies that have adapted over recent decades to capture the manna. Chemonics, which landed the contract for ALP in the southern region of Afghanistan—known, inevitably, by the clumsy ALP/S—is one of these.

Chemonics' initial contract provided for $119 million, for use in three Afghan provinces over a four-year period. Roughly one year after the contract became official in early 2005, Chemonics had spent only a tiny percentage of its authorization, and a large part of that on its own start-up costs. Earlier this year, at its well-equipped building in Kandahar, guarded around the clock by a private security detail, I counted 10 brand-new SUVs. And yet, until this year, ALP/S was hardly visible in Kandahar, and only rarely had an international presence here. According to a former worker on the project, international employees can earn up to about $180,000 a year—plus 35 percent hazard pay, 35 percent "post differential," and 20 percent for working Saturdays. But USAID, the former worker said, pays the company some $500,000 to $600,000 for each of them. Little surprise that Afghans wonder where the development dollars are going.

My initial contacts with ALP/S in May 2005 were warm, if a trifle confusing. The members of the agribusiness team were enthusiastic but unsure of how they could help. They kept inviting me to lunch at the German restaurant around the corner from their office, as though such charity could replace substantive help. What I needed was money—something they had plenty of. A year's start-up funding would have been perfect, $50,000 or $70,000, until sales kicked in. The ALP/S workers said they couldn't give grants and told me to write up a business plan.

Estimate is the word, a euphemism for "shot in the dark." I was, like many business-plan authors, making it up. But by the end of June, I had submitted my 15-page document, and it included soap formulas, a list of raw materials and products, a description of likely markets and marketing strategies, and a schedule of production activities, both daily and seasonal. Its projections have proved quite accurate, at least in terms of raw-materials costs and margins. Even the monthly operating costs have checked out.

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However, at my next meeting with the ALP/S team in Kabul, applause did not break out. "It needs more numbers," commented one team member. I asked what kind of numbers; he could not specify. A Chemonics bigwig, in Afghanistan on a different project, volunteered to build me a spreadsheet. "It would be good if you could show yourself breaking even within six months," he advised. A few days later, he e-mailed me an opus. Fourteen screens long on my laptop, in a rainbow of colors, it began with "Production Coefficients," then scrolled through equipment procurement, loan-repayment summaries, sales figures, labor costs, packaging and shipping costs, and cash-flow statements. It took me two weeks, full-time, just to fill in the cells with real numbers. And I have a master's degree from a U.S. university. I began to wonder how Afghan entrepreneurs would ever be able to negotiate such requirements.

Sometimes my numbers puzzled Chemonics personnel. Why had I altered the working hours per person for October? Answer: October that year was when Ramadan fell. No one is going to make an Afghan work more than four hours a day during Ramadan. Similar questions arose when purchases of pomegranates were entered only for October and November. Pomegranates are fruit, I explained. They have a growing season. It's not like supermarkets in the West, stocked all year long.

The expectation that a start-up business, located in one of the most volatile and dangerous cities on Earth, should break even within six months seemed excessive. In any case, the ALP/S agribusiness team greeted the spreadsheet with a snort. "We don't need anything like that. He just loves to cook up these spreadsheets," they remarked of their colleague. I was stunned, but not ungrateful for the thought process this task had imposed. And I started over on a different type of business plan.

Meanwhile, our cooperative had gotten under way. It took an entire day to extract our seed-oil press from customs in Kabul—and would have taken longer but for the intervention of the brother of one of our members, who worked in the finance ministry. Braced in its wooden box in the backseat of our borrowed brown car, it looked like nothing so much as a crate of ammunition. Miraculously, no one stopped us on the six-hour drive along the newly paved road out of the Afghan capital.

We reached Kandahar. We uncrated the weighty machine. Tried to set it up—no diagram came with the instructions, and damned if I knew the difference between a press cylinder and a press head. With a couple of rocks, we cracked some almonds we had bought in the bazaar and put the nuts in the funnel at the top of the machine. Then, while two of us sat on the corners of the baseplate to hold it down, Ali Ahmad, stripped to undershirt and ballooning Afghan trousers, ceremoniously began cranking the handle. Out came ... almond flour. No liquid of any sort. I called a world away to Germany on my cell phone, to E. Peter Matthies, the gentleman who had sold us the thing in the first place. Across the infuriatingly broken connection, he walked us back through the assembly process. "Oh ... that nozzle thing goes *inside* the part that screws onto the end of the cylinder?"

We tried again. Golden liquid began oozing out the pin-sized holes in what I now knew to be the press cylinder.

It took us two days of hard labor to persuade the machine to squeeze oil from the tiny wheat-shaped stones that are pomegranate seeds, but once we did, we could stun farmers, whose bloodlines had run in pomegranates for centuries, with the sight of it. "Praise God," they would marvel, rubbing the liquid between gnarled fingers.

USAID pays Chemonics some $500,000 to $600,000 for each employee. Little surprise that Afghans wonder where the development dollars are going.

Speaking with women, I learned that distilling rose water was a traditional craft; some of the older women still knew how to do it. I knew that black cumin was cultivated in the highlands. "What other tasty seeds grow here?" I asked the mother of a friend. "Lots!" she answered. "There's *khwajawalani* ..." I stared at her. How was I supposed to put my tongue around that? Her daughter-in-law answered the easier question: "Anise," she translated. And so we began producing deep-green anise oil.

Soon the guys started getting into it. They would bring dried roses or handfuls of sticks back from the bazaar. A dye: madder root, normally used for coloring carpet wool its characteristic red, or sweet-scented licorice. One day another of our members, Abd al-Ahad, came clutching a bag full of peacock-blue, pea-sized beans. "*Shneh*," he said, handing me the bag. "*Shneh* has a lot of oil." I cracked one between my teeth—and was transported into a grove of evergreens. I called the local agriculture specialist for the Portland, Oregon–based charity Mercy Corps. "Atiqullah?" I asked him. "What's *shneh*?"

"Let me call you back."

Half an hour later, after he had ferreted through his books and papers, my cell phone rang: "Maybe it's *Pistacia khinjuk*."

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"Sorry?"

"*Pee, ahyee, eys ...* " Atiqullah spelled out, shouting the letters to aid my comprehension. I scribbled, then typed my best guess into a search engine on my laptop, connected by satellite to the Internet. Atiqullah was absolutely right: What I had eaten was a variety of wild pistachio nut, henceforth the source of one of our oils.

It was magic to be creating something beautiful and entirely new out of these simple and ancient ingredients, so long neglected.

Late in the fall of 2005, six months after my initial contact, I received a document informing me that ALP/S's "Proposal Review Committee"—meaning the handful of guys I had sat around a table with so often—had decided not to accept our proposal. Given our progress and their promises, I was floored. The reasons listed in the letter were:

- ALP/S is looking for large-scale proposals, and of a proven business model ...
- ALP/S' client, USAID, is asking that it focus its efforts in Helmand province, as opposed to Kandahar.

I interrupted my reading to stare blindly at the window. *Then why did they drag us through this whole saga in the first place*? I wondered.

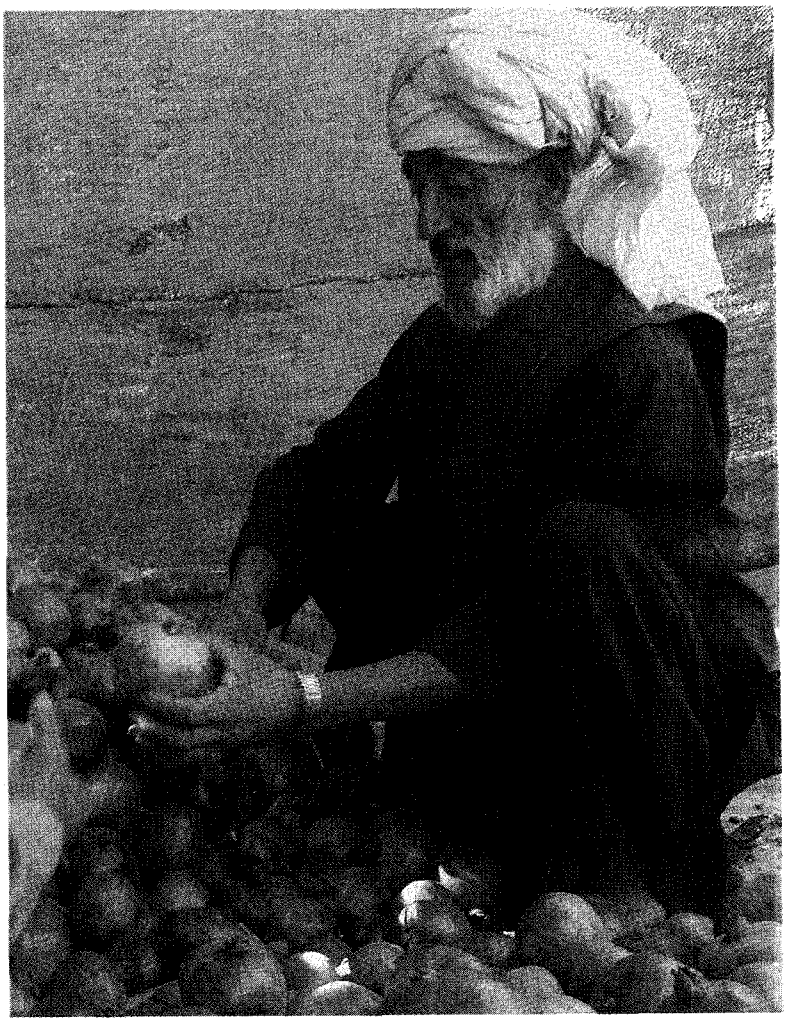
- The ALP/S funding framework has been created to support primarily the cost of building a production facility and its ancillary costs, and less that of operating costs.

Yet, when I asked ALP/S early this year for funds to build a facility, they balked, saying they did not know if they were allowed to pay for any new construction, and that in any case, the resulting building would then be the property of the U.S. government, not Arghand.

To be fair, ALP/S was subject to the mercurial temper of its USAID masters. Chemonics employees complained that the agency kept moving the goalposts, a charge that one of them detailed in a letter written after he resigned in disgust and left Afghanistan. For months after the start of Chemonics' contract, according to several former employees, it had been nearly impossible to hammer out even a basic plan to govern ALP/S activities because USAID kept changing its mind. And while the organization in charge of the crucial alternative-livelihoods dossier was treading water—at roughly $45,000 per month per person—the Afghan south was falling prey to resurgent Taliban and drug smuggling.

ALP/S did try, desperately, to spend money. One outlay was for a feasibility study of a large dairy and milk-processing plant in Helmand province. A consultant from Kansas whom I knew was brought in; he asked me for advice. I could have told ALP/S for free that such a project was not feasible. For starters, an industrial dairy would produce exactly the opposite effect that the program wanted: It would *reduce*, not increase, alternative livelihoods, since it would put out of business all the small-scale farmers who sold the milk of their two or three cows. Moreover, the market for milk products in the sparsely populated province was too small to support an industrial dairy. The answer was a small collection dairy, adapted to local circumstances, with precautions taken to handle the deteriorating security situation. The Kansas consultant's costly study declared an industrial dairy to be unfeasible. And that was the end of that story.

"Cash for work," otherwise known as paying people for short-term unskilled labor, is standard for ALP/S. The Chemonics Web site boasts that ALP/S "has provided immediate cash-for-work opportunities, drawing thousands of workers away from poppy cultivation." This sounds great—except during poppy-harvesting season, when the $4 to $5 a day ALP/S pays can't begin to



FRUITS OF SUCCESS: a pomegranate merchant in Kandahar

SARAH CHAYES

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compete. This year, the opium harvest absorbed the entire southern Afghan workforce, for wages of up to a locally staggering $25 a day.

What, precisely, Chemonics was accomplishing for its $119 million was a growing mystery.

By contrast, ordinary individuals rolled up their sleeves. Between chorus practice and cross-country running, my 16-year-old partner, Mari Oye, whipped up a Wellesley High School Afghanistan Club, attracting other students who wanted to make a difference in the world, as well as earn a few community-service hours. She and her classmates held car washes and bake sales to raise money, and boned up on Afghanistan to explain the project. They also served as our sales representatives, securing retail accounts in two Boston-area boutiques; we made the first sales of our soap during Christmas 2005. The students arranged for me to speak at the Wellesley Free Library, setting up an exhibit of Afghan crafts as a backdrop. Thanks to the students, our cooperative was a local phenomenon.

Suddenly, indeed, our soap-factory-in-the-sky was becoming reality. I realized I had better get some structure. A group of friends and acquaintances who had been following my Afghanistan adventures rallied around to constitute a board of directors. After hearing my talk at Wellesley, a classy lawyer volunteered to join. The articles of incorporation and bylaws she composed were as elegant as a mathematical proof.

And things went on like that.

One scene sums up for me the outpouring of spontaneous support we have received: a bright kitchen/breakfast nook in Denver. Six women—brash, loud, competent—sitting around a table, with coffee mugs and plates of brunch food before them. They are marketing executives, called together by a transplanted Canadian friend, a former government official and museum director. I am dressed in a traditional black-velvet Afghan vest, sewn with mirrors and loops of silver braid. "Forget about soap," laughed one of the women. "Where can we get our hands on those *clothes*?"

I passed around our rock-like bars of soap, then the mundane rectangular bars from the shelves of a local health-food store. "You've got an incredible product here," the execs agreed. And they launched in. The marketing strategy we hammered out around that table, along with the design principles for labels and promotional materials and the time frame for moving into the North American market, have governed the cooperative's business model ever since.

Something about our story—perhaps its sheer improbability—speaks to people. A French Canadian television network aired a news segment about us, shot partially in a village that became the front line in fighting against the Taliban last year. The next day 50 e-mails clogged our "info" box. Many of the people who wrote have become mainstays. One designed our Web site. Given the new Quebec link, we needed a French version. A translator offered her services. Two women decided to open a shop to retail our products and others like them. A Canadian CPA completed our 2006 tax filings and sent box after box of supplies to Kandahar: a plethora of tools and work gloves, 10 packages of toys for the children of cooperative members, carefully selected by his own son. Our retailers have hosted fund-raisers.

POEM IN THE PROPHETIC MANNER

They're kicking butt at Yankee Stadium,
They're tearing the old palace down,
The thieves have stolen the radium,
The professor's as sad as a clown.

And the widows and orphans are crying
Because they're allergic to dust,
The magazine husband is dying,
The preacher says yes, he must.

In jail when the turnkey is sleeping,
The poet picks locks in the dark.
Not all the old willows are weeping
As the pigeons come to roost in the park.

We're just a bunch of bozos.
The barbarians are back at the gate,
Though the idols are losing to Moses,
And the grocer says it's too late.

It must be my destiny calling,
It must be the onset of fall,
The clouds and the curtains are falling,
The convicts are standing tall.

O bard in the belly of the whale,
O sinner pretending to pray,
Wherever you are, you're in jail,
In jail at the end of the day.

—DAVID LEHMAN

David Lehman's books of poetry and criticism include *When a Woman Loves a Man* (2005) and *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998). Lehman is the founding editor of *The Best American Poetry*, and he edited the most recent edition of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006).

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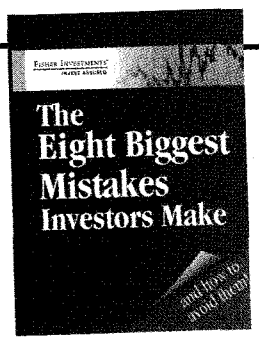

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There was no denying it: People in the West want to help. But it seemed that often they weren't sure how. What we were providing, I came to realize, was a way for them to do so—a way to get stuck in. Not everyone can drop his or her life and move to Afghanistan. We serve up alternative options, so people can participate according to their abilities and means. Even consumption—that overindulged American pastime—can help, if engaged in thoughtfully. The dollar bill is a phenomenal force for change, I now know, if spent on products and processes that respect the environment and promote dignified livelihoods, rather than destroying them. I have come to feel that what we offer people in the West—an opportunity to participate—may be just as meaningful as whatever benefits we bring to Kandahar.

It was the unflagging effort of a maverick Afghan American Chemonics employee (who didn't last long) that finally did win us an eight-month contract with ALP/S worth almost $80,000. And by the time we completed our end of the bargain—a month early, on March 1 of this year—our cooperative had become a darling of ALP/S. We had exceeded all our production goals; we were providing sustainable alternative livelihoods to our members as well as the farmers from whom we bought raw materials; we were selling out in nine shops in the United States and Canada, and had 70 more waiting in line; and we were expanding. In a war zone.

During visits by six different members of ALP/S, we were repeatedly assured of a follow-on contract. After only a few bouts of irritation and several humorous exchanges with the latest program director, I submitted our proposal.

One day in early May when I was waiting for news of its status, yet another ALP/S officer dropped by, this one freshly arrived. In tow he had a former Chemonics vice president and an extra vehicle full of bulletproof-vested, gun-toting security personnel—something I had repeatedly asked ALP/S to avoid, as it makes waves in the neighborhood.

The two men had little notion of what we did, so I took them on a tour. They made enthusiastic noises and at the end asked me what I wanted from them. I was a little taken aback. Some feedback on the status of our proposal would be nice, though this was a different ALP/S employee's responsibility. The gentlemen said they would "take a look and see what it needed."

This sounded sickeningly familiar. I was under the impression that our proposal had been complete for weeks. Now I would probably have to start the application procedure all over again, at the whim of yet another incoming ALP/S manager.

The letter I received from him a few days later confirmed my premonition. It requested a ream of further documentation, such as a breakdown of the raw-materials cost of a bar of soap and our financial accounts from previous years. "Maybe even more importantly," the letter went on,

> we need to show the real raison d'etre for all of this. It's because there's real demand for your products. Demand is not your problem, Sarah, satisfying it is. You've already established a vibe in the market. You're selling in Manhattan and sundry other swanky places. You've had plenty of free publicity in media with the appropriate reach to capture the attention of the chattering class whose hands you're washing. The wind is now behind you and you've an opportunity to make a significant contribution to establishing Afghanistan as something other than a squalid state exporting only smack and terror. This is what USAID wants to hear.

Peppering this and subsequent communications were colloquialisms like "the first thing we've gotta make plain ..."

I replied, providing the requested information, but also a statement of frustration. I was swiftly scolded for my tone: "unbusinesslike, unmannerly, and just plain unaesthetic."

A few days later, after another volley, I received a lapidary note from the head of ALP/S: "Sarah, Please ignore the other emails, those not written by me. The encouragement of staff initiative can have exasperating consequences."

I was, for once, utterly speechless.

This kind of management is what our government was buying for $45,000 or so a month? This is what it was offering Afghanistan?

For a night and a day after receiving that note, I turned things over in my mind. The decision I was reaching put a hard lump between my heart and my stomach—not least because my own salary was to be covered in the new ALP/S grant. I took my cooperative members' pulse. Several of them, I could tell, did not approve. They are Afghan and practical. *Take the money while it's being offered*, I could hear them think. *Tomorrow may bring calamity*. But one of them, Nurallah, spoke out loud. "My advice is this: You should never kiss anyone's hand for money." His sentiments echoed mine exactly.

And so I withdrew our proposal. "We'll make it, somehow," I thought, putting my faith in our far-flung family. And we are making it, thanks to the members of our cooperative, private foundations, individual donors—and the Canadian International Development Agency, which is somewhat more imaginative than my country's own.

Sarah Chayes is the founder of the Arghand Cooperative and author of *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban.*

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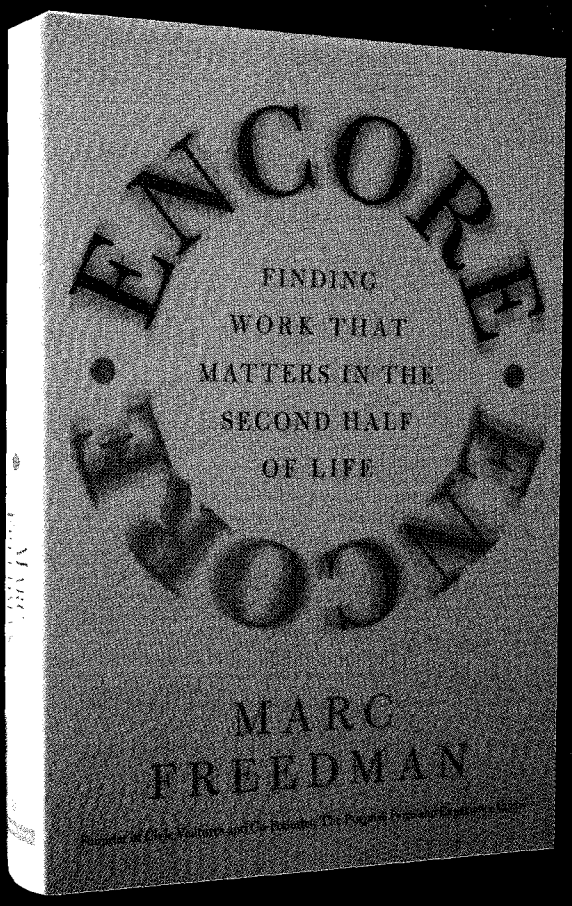

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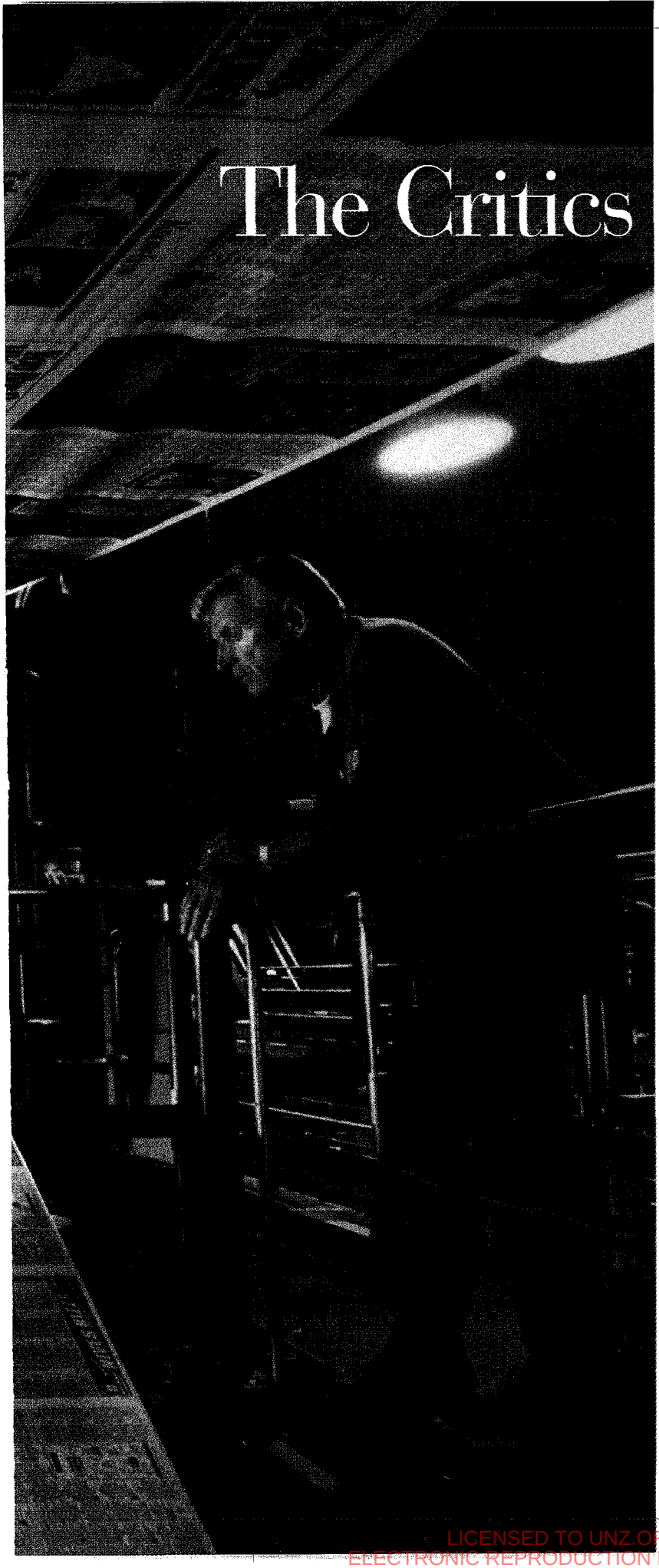

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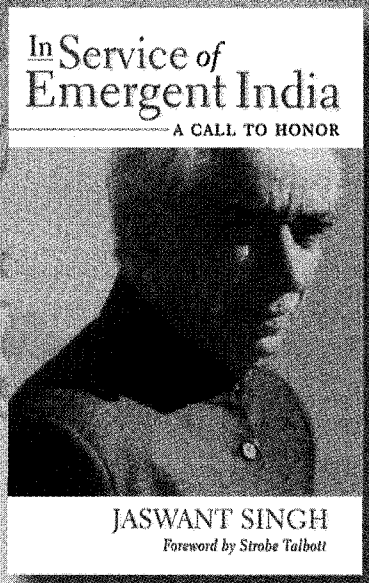

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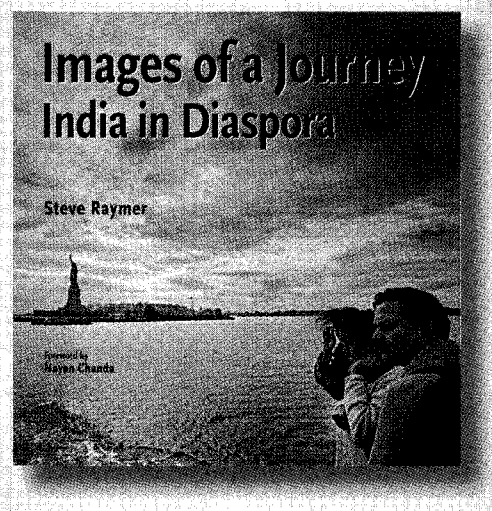

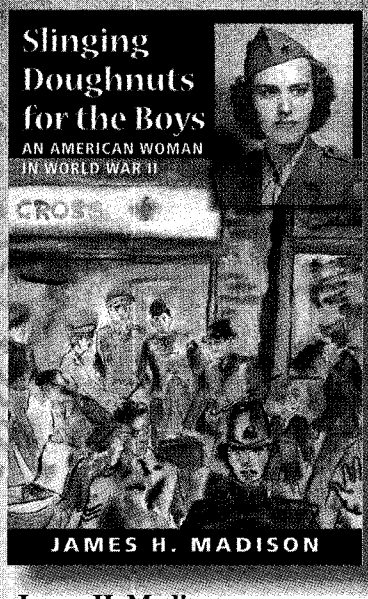

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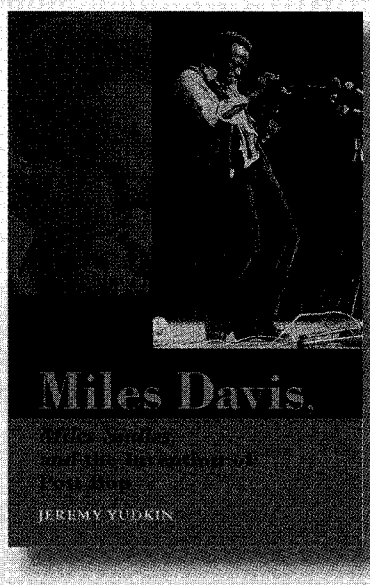

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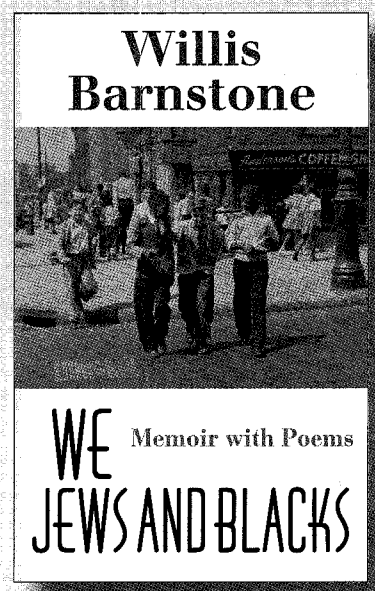

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BOOKS

Editor's Choice: Womanizer, bribe-taker, statesman—the cynically brilliant Talleyrand inspired an equally colorful biographer.

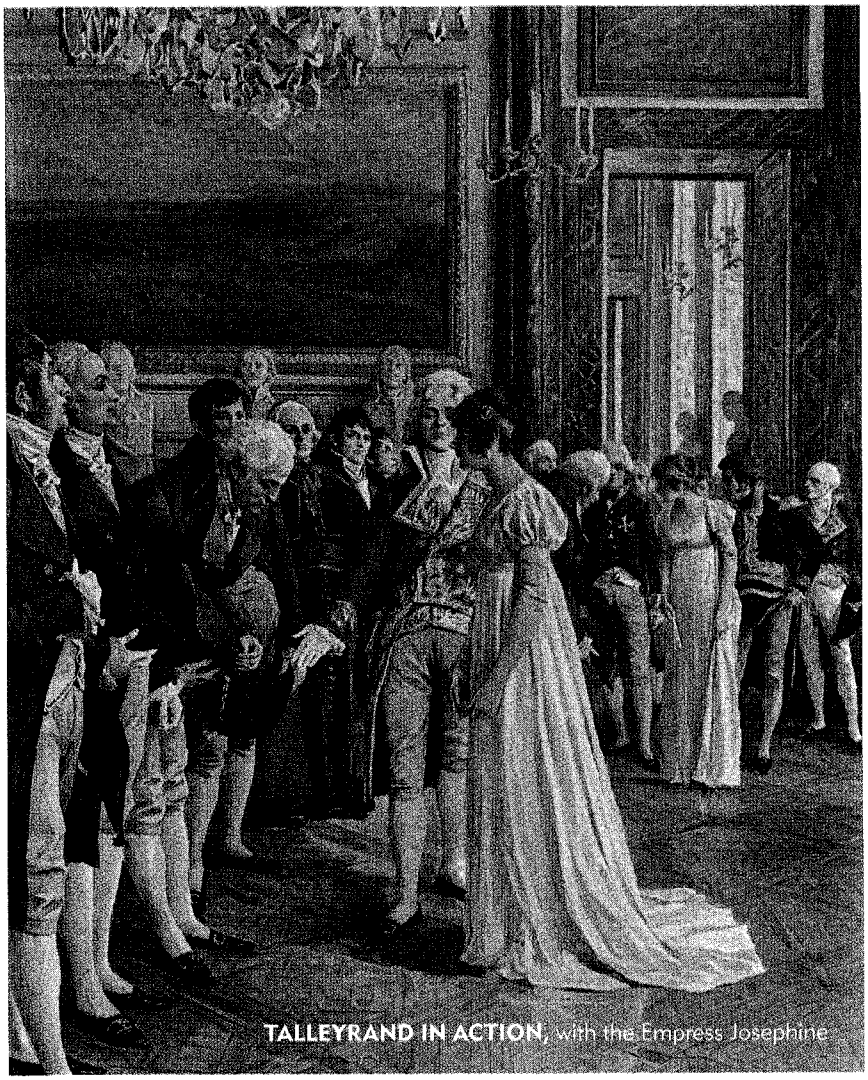
Charm Offensive

BY BENJAMIN SCHWARZ

He is one of history's great survivors—and opportunists. Born into the high aristocracy, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754–1838) was by 34 a worldly, womanizing bishop. With the overthrow of the ancien régime, he adjusted to the new realities and embraced the revolution, rising fast and high in the new order even though it meant his excommunication. He fled the Terror, first to England and then to America. But Citizen Talleyrand soon returned, ingratiating himself with the Directoire and slithering into the remunerative post of foreign minister. He nicely timed his transfer of allegiance to Napoleon, who bade him to continue his brilliant, subtle conduct of French foreign relations. By 1808, having long since decided that Bonaparte had embarked on a ruinous course, Talleyrand was conniving with the emperor's enemies Tsar Alexander and Metternich, Austria's foreign-policy master. In 1814, with the armies that had fought Napoleon across the Continent at the gates of Paris, Talleyrand machinated to restore Bourbon rule. Reinstated as foreign minister (this time serving the dynasty the revolution had overthrown a quarter century earlier), he performed one of the great feats in the annals of diplomacy when, at the Congress of Vienna, he played perfectly his country's exceedingly weak hand, nimbly exploiting the rifts in the coalition that had been arrayed against France and gaining for it an equal status among the great powers.

Eight years before his death, Talleyrand schemed to bring the Bourbons' rivals, the Orleanists, to power. The new regime appointed him ambassador to Great Britain, a country that had expelled him as an agent of the revolution 36 years earlier. To those aghast at such a career, he could very well respond with one of the countless cynical bons mots attributed to him: "Treason is a matter of dates."

Arguably a turncoat, possibly a degenerate (his last mistress was his niece by marriage and the daughter of a former lover), certainly a shameless flatterer and world-class bribe-taker, Talleyrand was also the most skillful and farsighted diplomat of his age and a man of arresting grace, wit, and style. No wonder that during his American sojourn he developed an intense friendship with that most glamorous, coolly intelligent, and winning of the Founders, Alexander Hamilton (years after his return to



TALLEYRAND IN ACTION, with the Empress Josephine

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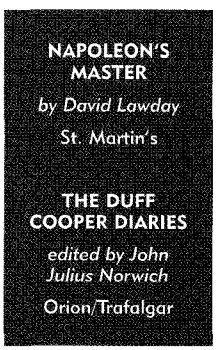
France, Talleyrand kept Hamilton's portrait over his mantelpiece). Like Hamilton, he had a rare rapport with and understanding of women—he counted many of the most intelligent, attractive, and influential of them as his friends or lovers, though one suspects they often adored him despite themselves. A French noblewoman recalled her entirely chaste surrender to his beguilement:

> One couldn't help regretting that there were so many reasons for not thinking well of him, and after listening to him for an hour one was compelled to banish the recollection of everything one had heard against him.

Indeed, to men as well as women, to his intimates, his masters, and his diplomatic opponents, this smooth and delightful aristocrat highlighted the dark side of charm: He was as seductive as he was obviously dangerous.

Talleyrand's ambiguity extends from his contemporary and personal reputation to his grand historical one. He consistently profited from his renegadism, but was he also following the dictates of France's interests? Is there, as his (reluctant) admirer Henry Kissinger—a man whose own antennae have always been exquisitely attuned to the winning side—suggested in *A World Restored*, "a certain consistency in this behaviour, an effort to balance by his changes of side the excess of his contemporaries ... a sincere attempt to remain in a position to moderate events"?



No surprise, then, that this protean figure has attracted (and often revolted) historians and biographers. Talleyrand himself wrote multiple volumes of delectable but tendentious (even by the low standards of the genre) *Memoirs*. Since they were published, 60 years after his death, French writers have regularly condemned—and less regularly elevated—his character and achievements. In 1870, Sainte-Beuve famously and eccentrically devoted his unrivaled literary talents to a lacerating indictment of Talleyrand. (Georges Lacour-Gayet's biography, completed in the 1930s, is at four volumes the most exhaustive study; Jean Orieux's mannered one, translated into baroque English in 1974, is probably the most reliable.) Until now, the last important Anglophone book was *Talleyrand*, an elegant masterpiece published in 1932 by Duff Cooper, the English diplomat, soldier, statesmen, bon viveur, and Francophile. This year, however, two British journalists—David Lawday, the former chief Paris and Washington correspondent for *The Economist* (and a contributor to this magazine), and Robin Harris, a historian, a Conservative Party official, and the ghostwriter of Margaret Thatcher's memoirs—each published a biography. Harris's is the more authoritative and better written of the two, but, alas, it has been published only in the U.K. Neither it nor Lawday's intelligent and breezy book, which has just been published here, can approach Cooper's achievement, a book still in print. But both, drawing on more recent scholarship, correct a number of Cooper's errors and misapprehensions.

Why, after a prolonged drought (despite a perpetual interest in war, power, sex, and Parisian salon life), this relative flood of Talleyrand titles? These books betray a nostalgic admiration for a diplomatic style long out of favor, a style encapsulated in Talleyrand's admonition to his junior diplomats: "Above all, gentlemen, not too much zeal." With foresight and not inconsiderable courage, Talleyrand opposed Napoleon's ceaseless and destructive pursuit of *la gloire*, and instead urged a foreign policy of restraint and moderation. The emperor sought to transcend international politics by crushing his enemies; Talleyrand wanted to use them to help maintain the balance of power. Of course, all Talleyrand's efforts to modulate Napoleon's overweening ambition failed, and Talleyrand could be faulted for helping attach France in the first place to a force so inevitably dangerous. (Only after the punitive Peace of Pressburg, at the end of 1805, was Talleyrand convinced that Napoleon's ambitions were unlimited and perilous. But, as the historian Paul Schroeder argues, "All efforts to find some point in Napoleon's career at which he turned wrong or went too far are misguided. His whole character and career were fundamentally wrong; he always went too far.") Nevertheless, Lawday rightly praises Talleyrand's "epic struggle against Napoleon's imperial overreach," and he anachronistically tips his hand by adding, "If only our world's lone superpower ... were to lend him an ear."

It's safe to assume that Lawday isn't limiting his opprobrium to the current administration (after all, the United States has described itself as the sole superpower since the early 1990s), and neither would the archpragmatist Talleyrand. He would have found discomfiting the tenor of much of the last hundred years of American diplomacy—including the Clinton administration's hubristic proposition that America, "the indispensable nation," should not conduct its foreign policy as if it were "simply ... another great power," and JFK's stirring but rather hazardous notion that "to assure the survival and the success of liberty" throughout the globe, the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden." Adept at adroit maneuvering and tactical fine-tuning on a grand scale rather than at laying out the sort of ambitious doctrines and grandiloquent rhetoric that have largely defined American foreign policy, Talleyrand subscribed to the idea that statecraft's modest but arduous task is to enable one's country to survive and prosper in the world as it exists—not to transform international relations and not to further the alleged cause of mankind. Ever since Woodrow Wilson, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans have zealously embraced the at-once earnest and breathtakingly extravagant foreign-policy style of his "New Diplomacy." Here's two cheers for Talleyrand's long-despised Old Diplomacy—cool, even cynical; flexible, even inconsistent; restrained, even pedestrian.

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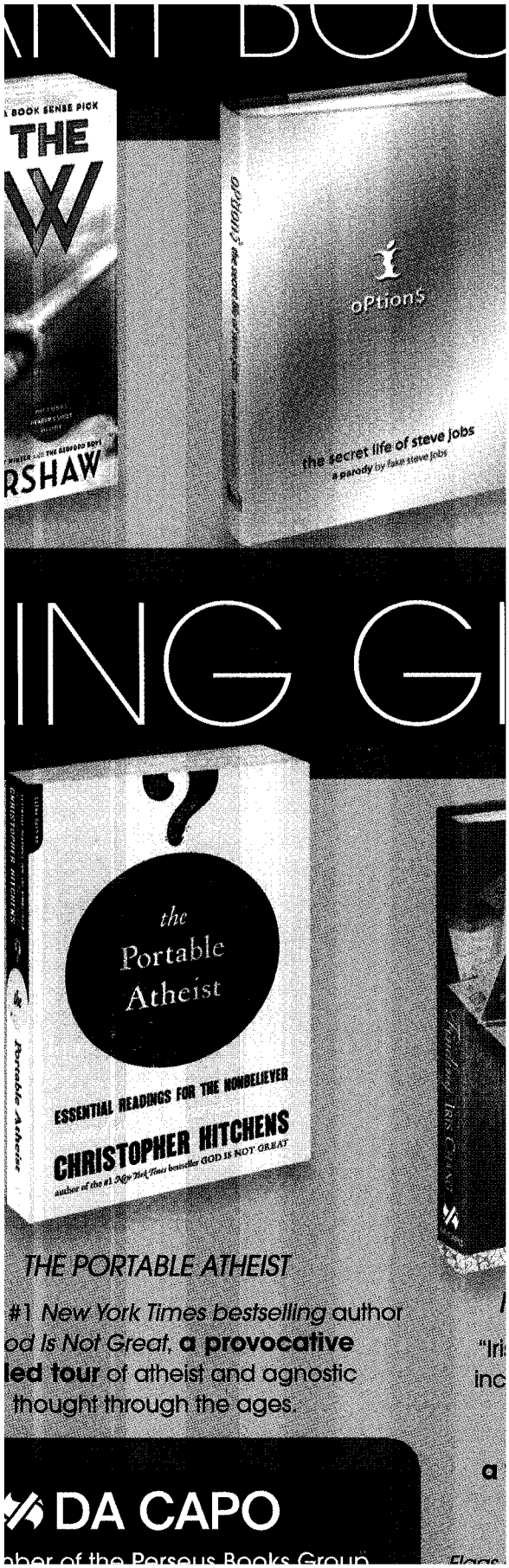

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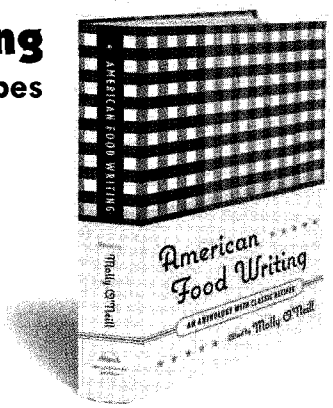

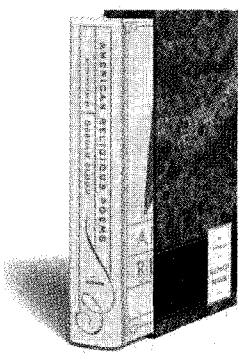

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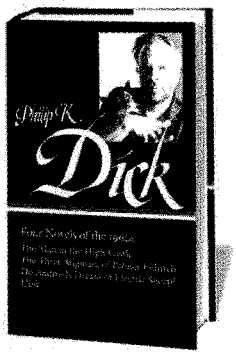

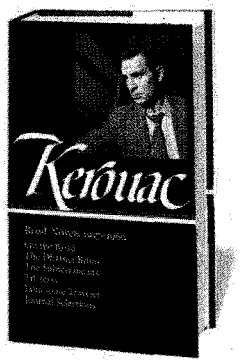

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An insouciant rake, recognized—like the subject of his most famous book—for his charm, sparkling conversation, and extraordinary smoothness with women, Duff Cooper (1890–1954) aspired to "brilliant success without undue application." His father was among England's most eminent physicians and its leading authority on venereal disease; his mother, the great-granddaughter of William IV, had been a notoriously fast woman, with a divorce, two elopements, and no doubt much else in her past when she married Dr. Cooper (between them they were said to have had an unrivaled knowledge of the English aristocracy's genitalia).

After Eton and Oxford, Cooper joined the Foreign Office. Long kept out of the Great War by his official duties, he was allowed to go to the trenches (as a Guards officer, naturally) only late in the conflict, after nearly all his intimates had been killed. With cool nerve under fire, he captured 18 German soldiers single-handedly, winning Britain's second-highest military honor, the Distinguished Service Order.

His crowd was "the cleverest, wordiest, quickest people in London," as his rival "Chips" Channon—the bitchy, social-climbing, and unaccountably brilliant diarist—described it, and he married no less than the reigning beauty of the age: the brightest of the bright young things, witty, intelligent Lady Diana Manners, youngest daughter of the Duke of Rutland. Although he wanted to enter politics, Cooper needed independent means, so with aristocratic ease Diana became an international stage and film star; thus, as a friend teased him, he allowed his celebrated wife "to barter her youth and beauty in a vain effort to gather sufficient money to satisfy your tastes ... and enable you to cut a fine enough figure to seduce her friends" (how right he was).

Cooper neatly advanced from Tory backbencher to junior minister (a job that gave him the leisure to write *Talleyrand*) to two high cabinet posts—secretary of state for war and first lord of the admiralty—that were especially crucial as Britain began to prepare for another war with Germany. He resigned

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this last office in protest of the Munich Agreement—one of the few shining political acts in a low, mean, dishonest decade (and a move that by all reasonable expectations should have ended his political career). Although his insouciance prevented his ascent to the top of the greasy pole, Cooper held a series of secondary posts during the Second World War and ended his political life as wartime and postwar ambassador to France, which required his skillful placating of those towering and explosive figures Churchill and de Gaulle.

His *Diaries*, published in Britain in 2005 and now available here, reveals the interlocking social, political, and intellectual elite that for nearly 40 terrible, glamorous, and epochal years formed Cooper's circle. It's so late seeing print thanks to its exhaustive record of its author's serial philandering, the one endeavor he approached with a Stakhanovite diligence. The details of his assignations and affairs with dozens of socially prominent women—nicknames such as Poppy, Kakoo, Daisy, and Loulou litter the pages—ruled out publication before all interested parties were long dead. (These diaries also confirm that, surprisingly, after a difficult period early in their marriage, Duff and Diana's partnership was a loving and extraordinarily close one, despite his open and habitual promiscuity.)

The book doesn't rival the era's two great diaries, those of Channon and of Harold Nicolson: Cooper's, obviously not intended for publication, lacks the fluency and style of his other writings and the masterly scene-setting and barbed-pen portraiture of Channon, Nicolson, and John Colville. The material concerning the two most historically significant events recorded in it—the abdication and the Munich crisis—have already been mined by John Charmley, author of a scintillating and definitive biography of Cooper. Still, these pages vividly evoke a rapidly shrinking smart set's grim partying during the First World War, retail dish about Rasputin's sexual prowess (and genitals), and deliver Cooper's intimate, usually spot-on assessments of Wallis Simpson, the Duke of Windsor, Churchill, Chamberlain, Beaverbrook, de Gaulle, Nancy Mitford, and Evelyn Waugh. They also contain such offhandedly swank entries as this one, from 1923, when Cooper visited Diana in New York, while she was performing on Broadway:

> Later we went to the Biltmore where Diana and I left our party and joined Cole Porter ... we went on again to supper with a man called Irving Berlin who writes music. He had a nice flat and gave us eggs and champagne. We had only been drinking whiskey out of flasks hitherto.

The drinking here was uncharacteristically moderate; Cooper was, as the diaries abundantly display, a chronic if highly functional inebriate, a role in keeping with his reputation as a sybaritic and slightly raffish, if unusually well-read, boulevardier.

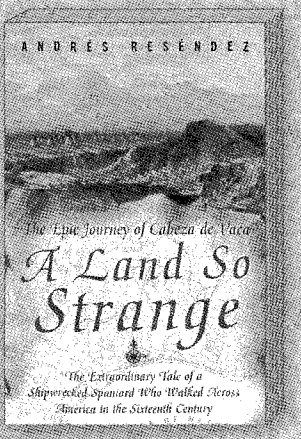
Although that reputation was not unjustified, Cooper cannot be defined by it, because when circumstances so demanded, he summoned—unhesitatingly, nonchalantly—an absolute firmness of purpose. In that way, his patriotism redeemed him. A cosmopolitan dandy who spent considerable time with a set whose members, as Orwell said, "would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during 'God Save the King' than of stealing from a poor box," Cooper couldn't stand "men who live, by choice, out of their own country," and said unabashedly, "My love of country admits of no limitations, makes no concessions ... it is ... blind, prejudiced, and passionate."

So, while during the Munich crisis the realistic and sophisticated arguments dictated appeasement, and although the differences between him and Chamberlain were all but cosmetic (indeed, from a cold-eyed, 21st-century perspective, meaningless), Cooper couldn't stomach Chamberlain's course because, as the cabinet minutes record his argument, "It was the honour and the soul of England which were at stake."

Benjamin Schwarz is *The Atlantic*'s literary editor and national editor.

An Epic Tale of Shipwreck, Exploration, and Survival

A LAND SO STRANGE
By Andrés Reséndez



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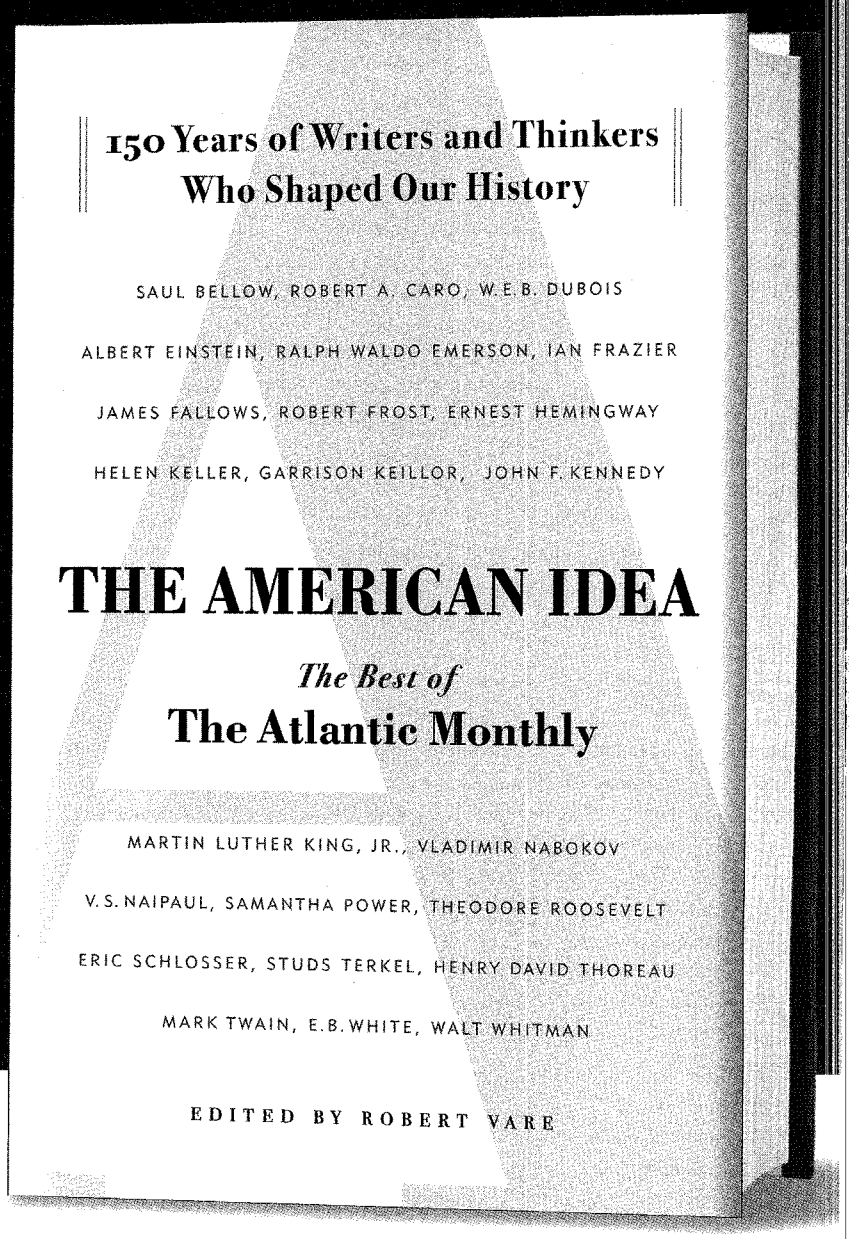

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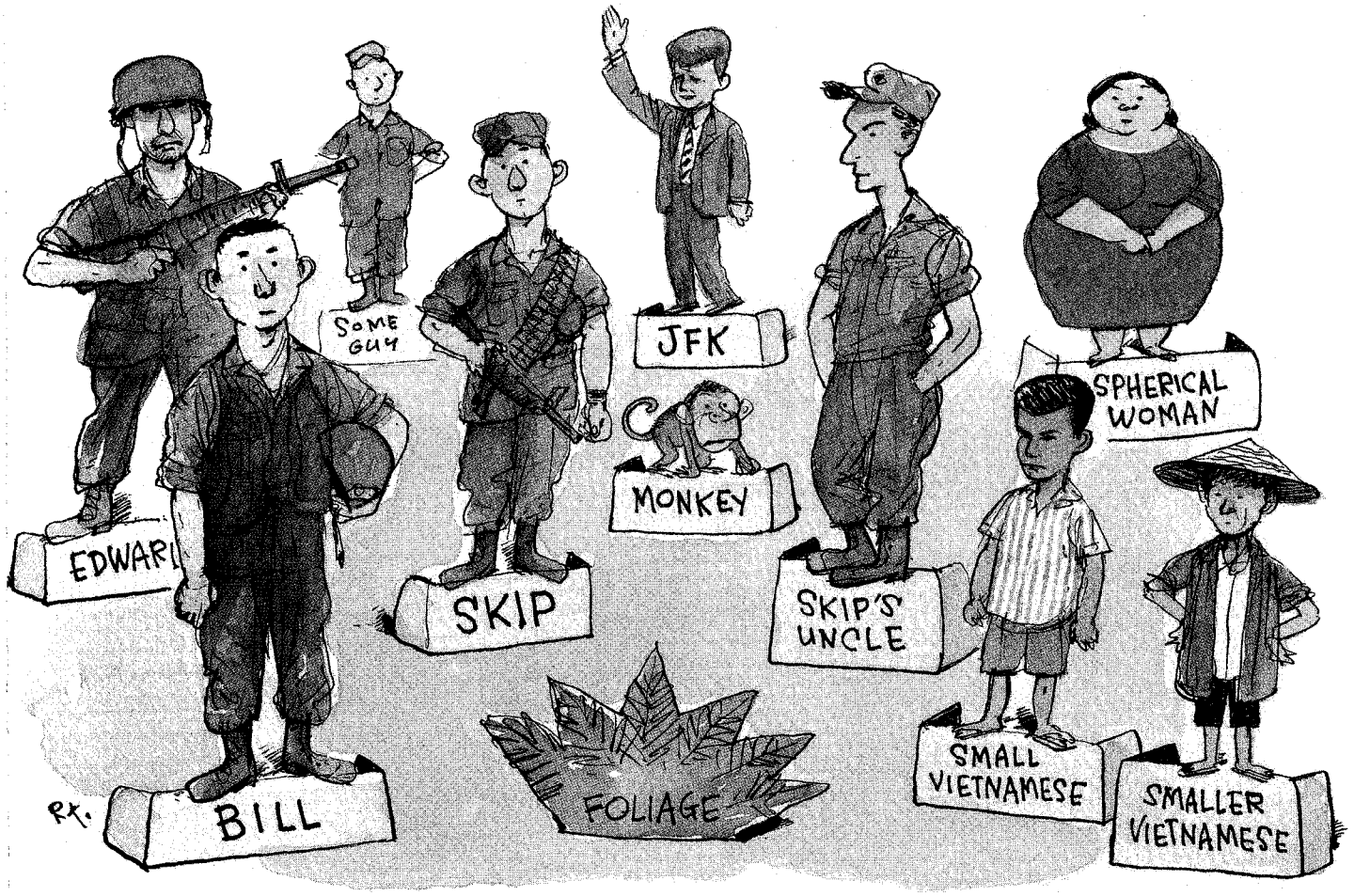

RICHARD THOMPSON

BOOKS

It's the most critically acclaimed novel of the fall. And it's astonishingly bad.

A Bright Shining Lie

BY B. R. MYERS

When a novel's first words are "Last night at 3:00 a.m. President Kennedy had been killed," and the rest of it evinces no more feel for the English language and often a good deal less, and America's most revered living writer touts "prose of amazing power and stylishness" on the back cover, and reviewers agree that whatever may be wrong with the book, there's no faulting its finely crafted sentences—when I see all this, I begin to smell a rat. Nothing sinister, mind you. It's just that once we Americans have ushered a writer into the contemporary pantheon, we will lie to ourselves to keep him there.

Having read nothing by Denis Johnson except *Tree of Smoke*, his latest novel, I see no reason to consider him a great or even a good writer, but he is apparently very well thought of by everyone else. According to *The New York Times*, which in 2006 sent a questionnaire to writers, editors, and critics, a collection of Johnson's short stories titled *Jesus' Son* is regarded by some as the best American book of the past 25 years. He is often called "a writer's writer," with the customary implication that this is far better than being a reader's writer. Denis Johnson is, in short, the sort of novelist whose work one expects to be reviewed on the cover of every prominent newspaper's book section, as *Tree of Smoke* was in September. Equally predictable was the reviewers' implicit injunction that we should ask not what the book can do for us, but what it can do for Johnson's place in American

TREE OF SMOKE
by Denis Johnson
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letters. This much is standard Important Writer treatment, and for all I know, Michiko Kakutani (*The New York Times*), Jim Lewis (*The New York Times Book Review*), and other reviewers consider Johnson worthy of it no matter what he puts out. What I find difficult to believe is that they admire *Tree of Smoke*. For one thing, their own prose is better than anything in it. For another, they try to lower our expectations for the book even as they cry it up as the main event of the fall publishing season. Lewis, for example, gives a marveling nod at the part in which "two drunken soldiers, one of them an amputee, have a long, inane conversation, during which the disabled one announces, 'My invisible foot hurts.'"

An amputee with a phantom limb, fancy that. Lewis's aside that *Tree of Smoke* "doesn't feel like a Denis Johnson novel" lends weight to the assumption that a writer cannot *become* famous by writing like this, at least not yet. But with no way to prove insincerity on the reviewers' part, I have to pretend to believe that they really do consider *Tree of Smoke* to be "something like a masterpiece" (Lewis) and "bound to become one of the classic works of literature" (Kakutani) about the Vietnam War. (The novel, a *New York Times* best seller, has been nominated for a National Book Award.)

Underlying the hype is the silly notion that if a work introduces plenty of characters and traipses after them for enough years and pages, it is ipso facto ambitious. The true mark of an ambitious work is its style and depth. We would recognize *Anna Karenina* as such a novel even if only its first few pages had survived, because they depict characters with extraordinarily rich and complex inner lives. In contrast, *Tree of Smoke* starts off with one Seaman Bill Houston shooting a tiny monkey he sees in the jungle. (The symbolism of this happening hours after JFK's assassination is crude in more ways than one.) The animal, evidently a gun buff, spreads its arms "enthusiastically" before dropping to the ground, where its mood changes. "With fascination, then with revulsion, [Bill] realized that the monkey was crying." Such a realization would take far too short a time for anyone to become fascinated, let alone for fascination to yield to revulsion—and why revulsion anyway? Later, Bill meets up with his younger brother James, a soldier. For some reason, Bill does not know James's age, and appears surprised to learn that he is not yet 18. James "done lied" to the recruiter. The level of their conversation can be imagined.

> Anyone expecting a psychological novel from characters so lacking in complexity deserves to be disappointed.

We are then introduced to another central character, Skip, with the news that

> having been raised in the American heartland he was dedicated to steering clear of personal controversy, to ignoring scowls, honoring evasiveness, fending off voices raised in other rooms.

Ignoring scowls is no way to steer clear of controversy, but never mind that. The derivation of a man's personality from his place of origin is the stuff of second-rate thrillers. After two months in the Philippines, Skip

> liked the people, he hated the climate. It was the start of his fifth year serving the United States as a member of its Central Intelligence Agency. He considered both the Agency and his country to be glorious.

Anyone expecting a psychological novel from characters so lacking in complexity deserves to be disappointed.

There is no point in dwelling on the story line, because even some of the book's admirers have conceded its sluggishness and overlength—albeit with some humbug about how flaws make a good novel more likable, perfection being such a turnoff, etc. As for the action, it never feels authentic. Soldiers do not laugh in unison or call out frantically for M&Ms during a sudden and intense firefight, nor would a soldier crawling through bush find the attendant lacerations "exhilarating." Not once does the reader feel fear or tension. Whether it's because of the compulsive references to the Kennedys or the constant emphasis on the soldier as rock-and-roll hipster, one thinks only of the silver-screen 'Nam and of *Life*, not life, feeble substitutes for the riches to be had from Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

Not even Robert De Niro's combination of Special Forces uniform and goatee in *The Deer Hunter*—which elicited howls of laughter in the theater near Fort Ord, California, where I first saw it—is as preposterous as *Tree of Smoke*'s Black Man, whom the U.S. Army and the tropical jungle allow to keep his name patch covered with tape. He prefers to be called Black Man, you see. He also likes gruffly telling other soldiers how small his penis is. Black Man is one of many indications that the author is unfamiliar not only with military life but with male company in general.

Another is the dialogue. This is Skip's uncle, a freewheeling colonel who is meant to seem intelligent and tough but comes off as neither:

> "Let's face it, our whole civilization is a layer of sediment. In the end some mongrel barbarian wakes up in the morning and stands with one foot on a rock and the other on the kicked-over vessel of Kennedy's eternal flame. And that vessel is cold and dead, and that sonofabitch doesn't even know he's standing on it. He's just taking a piss in the morning. When I get up in the morning and step behind the tent to break wind and void my bladder, whose grave am I pissing on?"

Note the jumble of language levels, the artsy compound adjective thrown in with profanity and genteelisms. At first I assumed that Johnson was poking

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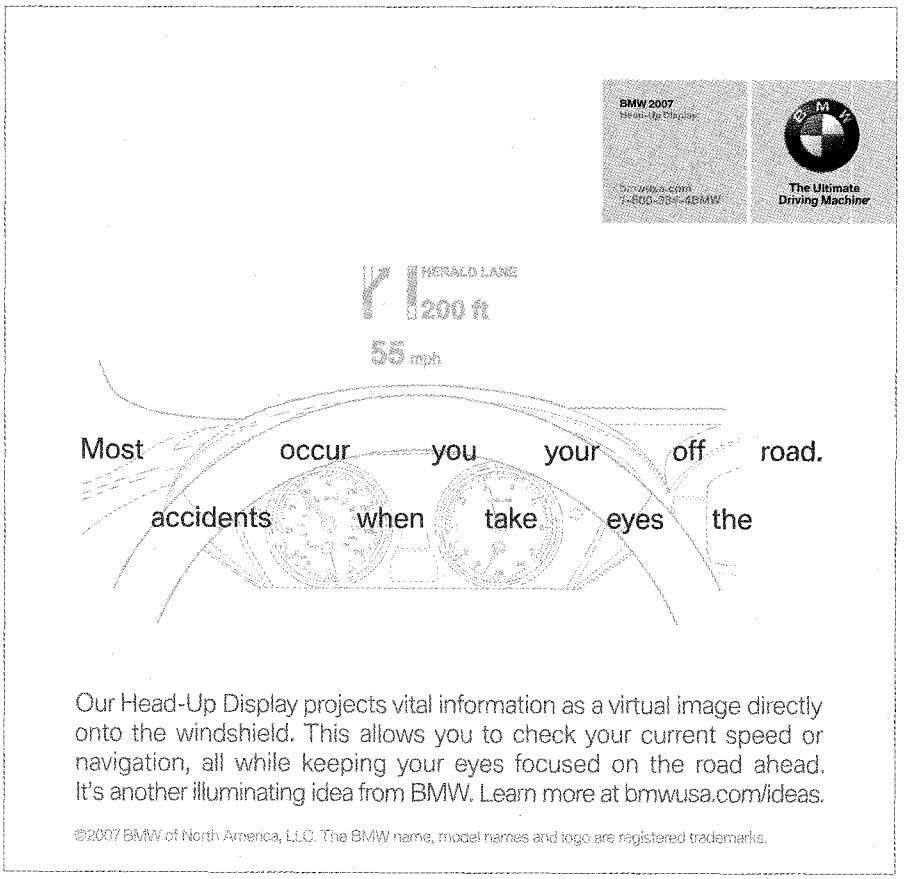
fun at the colonel for trying to conceal a lack of schooling, just as Hollywood makes us smile at gangsters' efforts to sound well-bred. (Much of Dickens's humor consists of precisely this sort of thing.) Alas, almost everyone in *Tree of Smoke* talks like the colonel, including the narrator: "He didn't see where she made water. When she wanted to piss ... " Fear of repetition, and an inability to write in such a way as to obviate it, may be partly to blame for these clashes. (A jeep is referred to the second time around as a "conveyance.") The bigger problem is that Johnson has no sense of style, of which words are right for a given context. This in turn makes it difficult to figure out whose point of view we are dealing with:

> Eight of the villagers attended, seven old men and someone's grandchild all sitting in candlelight around the temple's centerpiece without a corpse to look at, only a small crowd of bric-a-brac, mostly wooden Buddhas painted gold.

I had to backtrack in case I'd missed a white man peering through a window, because from the villagers' perspective a less appropriate word than *bric-a-brac* is hard to imagine. Nor does it fit the perspective of the narrator, who likes to contrast the Americans' parochialism with the quiet wisdom of the East, or his version thereof. No, Johnson writes of "bric-a-brac" for the same reason that he describes a woman as being "in actual point of fact spherical," for the same reason he writes, "To read and feel the meaning erode under the work of his mind—he was hungry for that pleasure." *Erode*!

The following inner monologue is meant to show us the dizzying heights that Skip scales while reading highbrow French books: "I want my mind to fail before the truth. I want the truth to flow over me only as something sensual and as nothing else. Want it to wet me ..." It is obvious that Johnson does not respect words enough to think they should mean something. But let us take an example from the first few pages, which reviewers seem to consider a high point of the book:



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> From all around came the ten thousand sounds of the jungle, as well as the cries of gulls and the far-off surf, and if [Bill] stopped dead and listened a minute, he could hear also the pulse snickering in the heat of his flesh, and the creak of sweat in his ears.

Could someone standing in such a noisy place hear even his heartbeat, let alone his pulse? The second half of the sentence cancels out the first, which is to say that the writer hasn't thought his way through, hasn't fully *felt*, any of it. As for *snickering* and *creak*, they will please only those who skim for startling word combinations, for novelty alone.

Johnson fills the space between purple passages by dropping his sentence subjects, leaving bursts of adjectives to stand alone, and generally doing a spot-on impersonation of Annie Proulx: "She waited in a dirt-floor café. Tin-roofed, straw paneled. Sat at a table drinking hot tea from a tin can ... " (This prose style grated horribly on me when I first read *The Shipping News*. It has since become so common I suspect someone is teaching it.) Description is simulated through bald lists of pallid images. When James rides a truck, he sees "rain dripping from gigantic leaves, deformed vehicles, small people," and so on. The reader must linger over slapdash formulations in order to make sense of them: "Listening for his murderers, he became aware of the oppressive life of the jungle, of the collective roar of insects, as big as any city's at noon."

It would be a rare novel that did not yield some infelicities, but I defy anyone to argue that those quoted here are not representative of every page of *Tree of Smoke*. I might also point out that no book review can convey the tedium of reading bad prose in such unrelieved bulk. Perhaps we can all agree on the need for at least one longish excerpt. Meet Edward:

> At the edge of a burning field once he'd found a dead dog with newborn pups at her teats, and he'd taken the minuscule beasts home and tried to nurse them from an eyedropper. That's who he'd been once.
>
> Recently he'd been struck with an idea for a wicked lampoon of *My Fair Lady*—a one-act, *The Wedding Night of Liza Doolittle and Henry Higgins*, with off-color lyrics set to the familiar melodies of "The Street Where You Live" and "I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face."
>
> The trouble was that in this cultural environment such a show would be, like Liza Doolittle (as he imagined her for the purposes of this entertainment), unmountable. And for the same reasons: conformity, prudery, feminine cowardice. He felt himself unsuited for the climate of his times. He could only stand outside and laugh at his own class, the educated emulators of British and American manners—his wife, her father the good senator, all those people—a light scum of gentility floating on a swamp.
>
> And everybody else, all his fellow Filipinos: a lot of superstitious maniacs, miracle seekers, statue-worshippers, stigmata-bleeders, berserk flagellants running on Good Friday through province after province with dripping, self-inflicted wounds ...

Shouldn't someone writing about the Vietnam War have more sense and eloquence than the politicians who prosecuted it?

It is not always easy to tell whether Johnson is being serious or merely unfunny, but I sense no irony here. Rather than disdain Edward's puerile humor and self-importance, we are to share his condescension toward a society that would never "get" his lampoon—which, by the way, has little chance of being off-color with an "unmountable" lead (another case of Johnson canceling out his own words). We are also to accept that although Edward is now the kind of man who lets puppies starve to death, and is something of a sociopath to boot, his experiences afford him unique insight into Philippine society. In a mad world only the madmen are sane, and all that. This—no better, no worse—is the intellectual and stylistic level of most of the novel. Now imagine reading several hundred pages of such prose.

I chose the above passage over others only because its misrepresentation of Philippine Catholicism is so typical of the book's greatest flaw. Johnson cannot comprehend the spiritual dimension of people's lives, a dimension that, as the adage about foxholes reminds us, takes on more and not less importance during a war. In *Tree of Smoke*, religious faith is just a plot device—along with The Dying Mom I Wasn't There For and The Dad I Can't Live Up To—to set off clichéd "arcs" of guilt, self-abuse, and redemption. The reference to Buddhist "bric-a-brac" was no anomaly: "A practitioner had ordered the buildings burned in a superstitious ceremony." We also get a jungle that "screamed like a mosque," and a Muslim-style bath that plunges a Catholic priest "into a spiritual nausea ... He lay on the bed gasping while the strength boiled out of his blood." Kathy, a Protestant, is so thrilled by John Calvin's "terrifying affirmations" of her "foreordained damnation" that she keeps returning to his "spiritual pornography like a dog to its vomit." That seems far too harsh to be the narrator, but it is impossible to believe that a Christian would think in those terms either. Johnson's failure to understand Kathy's faith is such that when he uses it to end the novel on an uplifting note, the reader feels nothing.

Not being religious myself, I do not feel personally insulted by any of this, and lest other tempers flare, let me make clear that free-thinking Skip, the man who wants the truth to wet him, cuts the silliest figure of all. Besides, most of Johnson's prose—the metaphor of the jungle as screaming mosque, for example—is too imprecise and empty even to give offense. One closes the

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book only with a renewed sense of the decline of American literary standards. It would be foolish to demand another Tolstoy, but shouldn't we expect someone writing about the Vietnam War to have more sense and eloquence than the politicians who prosecuted it?

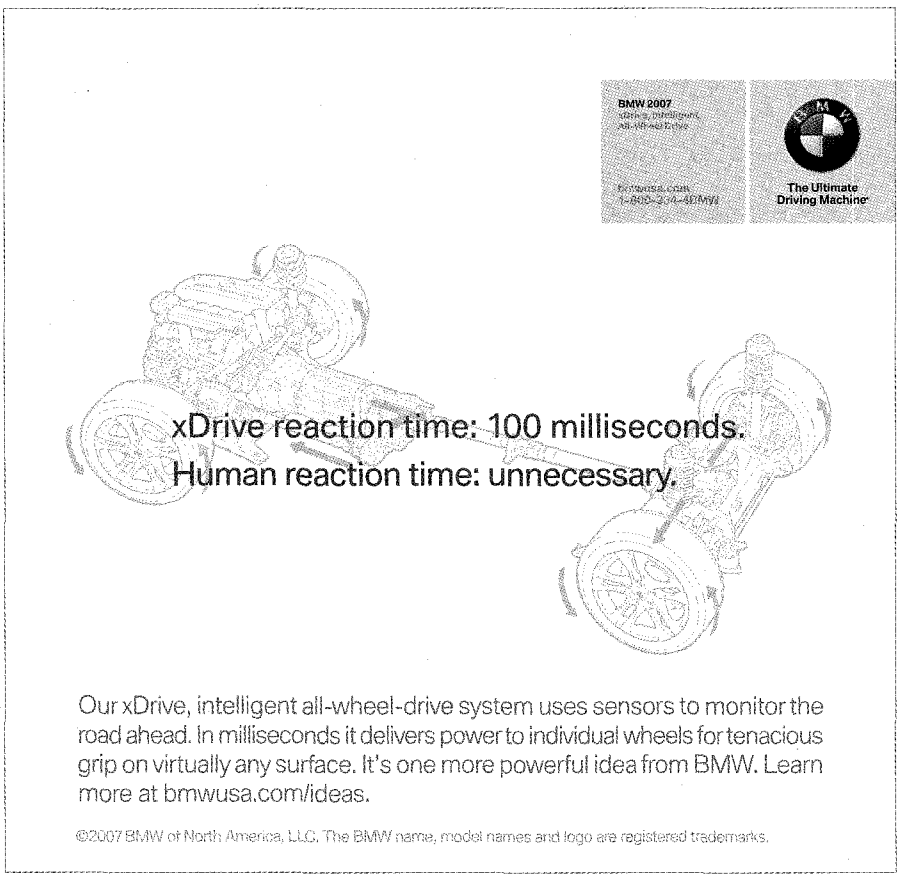
Those two qualities are linked. There can be no deep thought without the proper use of words, as our current president never fails to demonstrate. This is why it is dangerous to hold up bad English as good—and why Philip Roth should know better than to announce that Johnson writes "prose of amazing power and stylishness." There are people who will take that seriously. Less worrying, because so obviously lunatic, is Jonathan Franzen's blurb: "The God I want to believe in has a voice and a sense of humor like Denis Johnson's." Really? Then God help Jonathan Franzen.

Let's hear from a man who, for all his intellectual shortcomings, never said anything he didn't mean. Ezra Pound wrote this in 1931:

> The individual cannot think and communicate his thought, the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws without words, and the solidity and validity of these words is in the care of the damned and despised *litterati* ... when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot.

The "application of word to thing" has been rotting for some time now, and in the very terms described. The social and political consequences are all around us. Literati who contribute to the rot—whether to preserve a writer's reputation, to stimulate the book market, or simply to go with the flow—have no right to complain about incoherent government. The next time they want to praise a bad book, they should rave about the plot instead.

B. R. Myers is an *Atlantic* contributing editor and the author of *A Reader's Manifesto* (2002).



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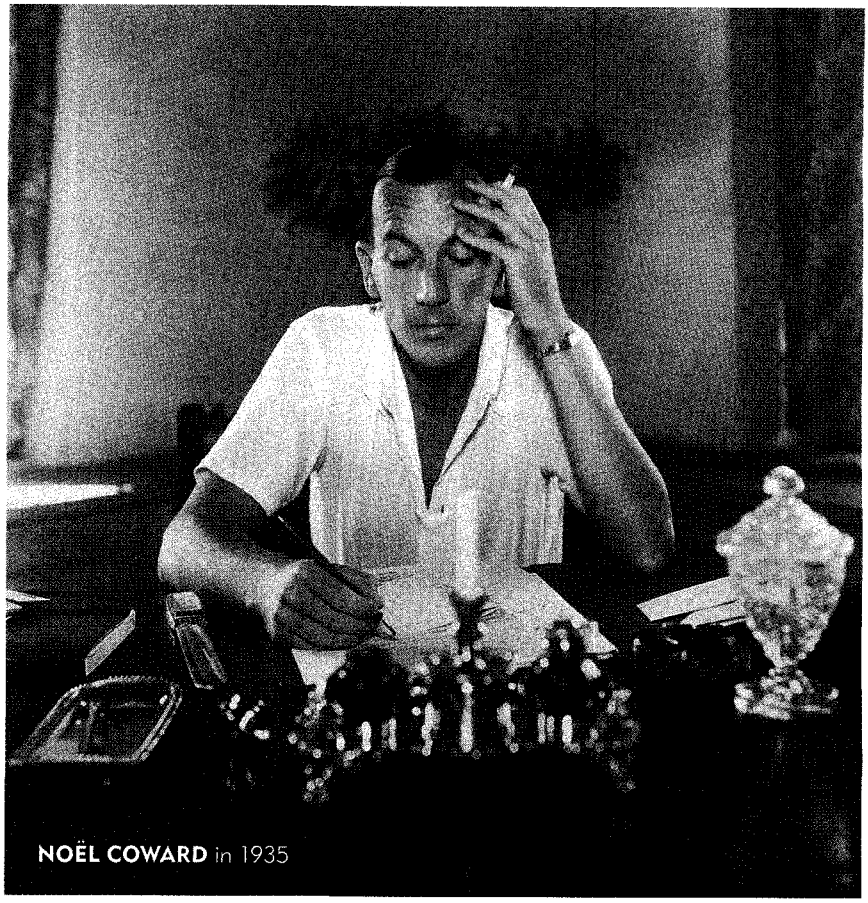
BOOKS

Noël Coward's dizzying life

Faster, Faster

BY THOMAS MALLON



NOËL COWARD in 1935

Back when popular culture actually had some, Noël Coward (1899–1973) seemed to create about half of it. In his songs ("Mad Dogs and Englishmen"), he put his own lyrics to his own music. On the London stage (*Private Lives*), he sometimes played the lead in the comedies he'd written. In the columns and on the town, he was so much the apex of sophisticated wit that not having been to "a party where they honored Noël Coward" was one reason, according to Rodgers and Hart, that the lady is a tramp. And yet, Coward's sophisticated wit had a peculiar come-join-us quality. Even when heard from the second balcony, the high-life repartee of *Design for Living* made listeners feel they were third-row center—and actually belonged there.

Any chance to unpack what Coward described as his "fluffy little mind" reveals, beneath all the brightly colored excelsior, an assortment of sharp and steely tools, a first-rate intelligence that received little more than the peculiar education to be had touring the English provinces as a child actor before the Great War. At 13 and 15, respectively, Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, eventually his most important leading lady, learned not to eat too many peppermints after throwing up all over the scenery of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Hannele*. (They were playing angels.)

THE LETTERS OF NOËL COWARD
edited and with commentary by Barry Day
Knopf

Coward's glamorous adult success writing for stage and screen sprang from excellent theatrical instincts and a lot of bloody hard work. If love really *were* all—well, then there wouldn't have been time for so much of everything else. Coward generally kept his romantic affairs and disappointments within the well-regulated limits he set for his plays, and he built up a devoted, long-serving "family" of secretaries and majordomos who kept his spirits high and his show going decade after decade, through the chromium brilliance of the '30s (*Private Lives*), the butched-up patriotism of World War II (*In Which We Serve*), and then the mixture of hits (*Brief Encounter*) and misses (*South Sea Bubble*) of his long last act, which ended with his death, in 1973, three years after a scandalously delayed knighthood.

Coming after three volumes of autobiography and a large compilation of his diaries, the just-published *Letters of Noël Coward* turns out to be a bit of a swindle, containing as it does loads of letters *to* the maestro as well as from him. Such an arrangement may have biographical potential, but the results here are a terrible jumble, the star having been thrown into a revue that needs lots of cutting and clearer direction. Still, time and again Coward steals back the scene, whether he's assessing a performance by Deanna Durbin ("She sang 'There'll Always Be an England' with tears rolling down her face as though she were bitterly depressed at the thought"); asking his new fan and correspondent, T. E. Lawrence, Aircraftman #338171, "May I call you 338?"; or defending his latter-day tax exile to a scolding Laurence Olivier:

> I also know, darling, that the best way I can serve my country is *not* by sitting in it with a head cold grumbling at the climate and the telephone service.

Coward's chief epistolary gift turns out to be not for zingers and self-justification but for careful truth-telling, for giving actors and intimates the firm correction they require, in a manner that risks, but manages to retain, their affections. His audience for this human and

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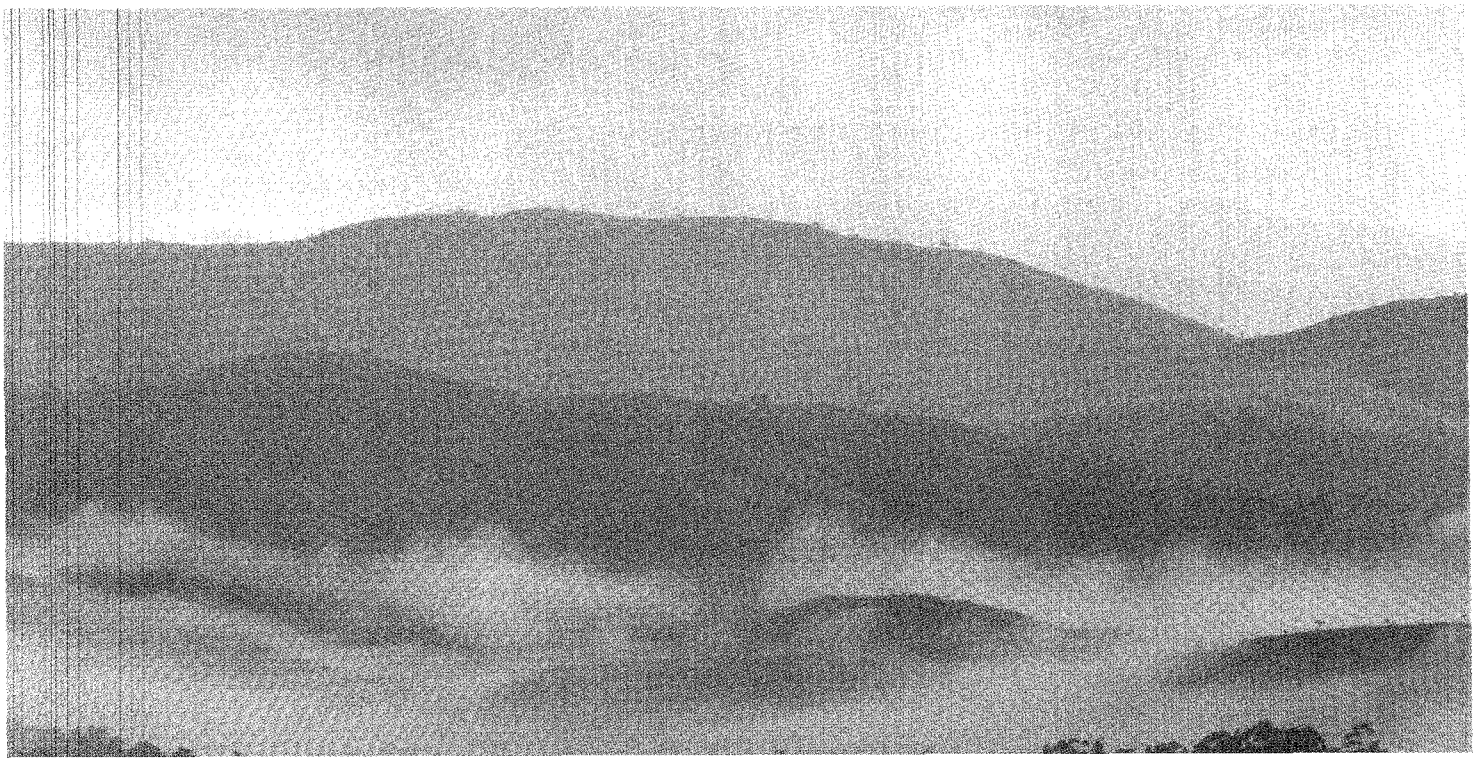

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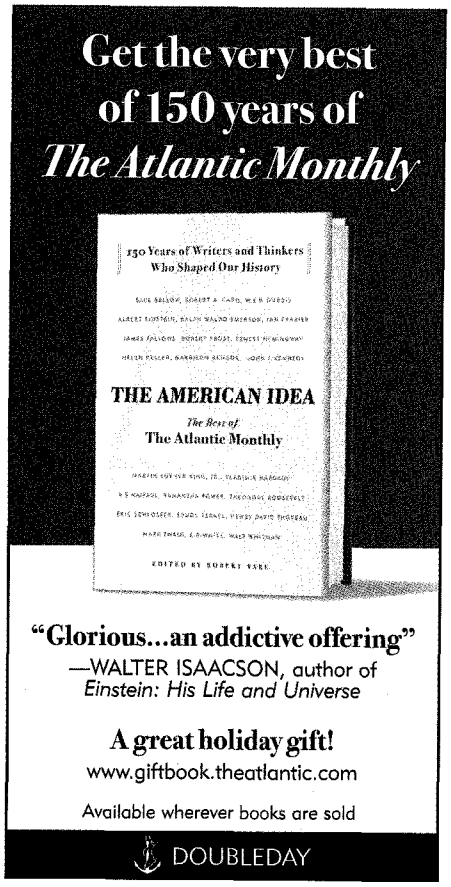

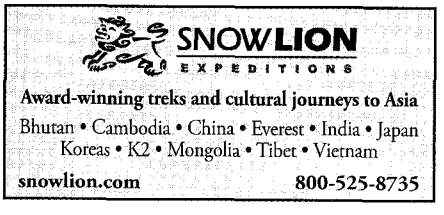

literary artfulness includes a deludedly grand Mary Martin:

> Please believe that your future career depends on your throwing away your ... exaggerated and grotesque conception of "Stardom" and concentrating on learning, diligently and painstakingly, to be the fine *artiste* your potential talent entitles you to be.

Marlene Dietrich, love-sickened by Yul Brynner, comes in for the same combination of velvet and sandpaper ("Stop wasting yourself on someone who only really says tender things to you when he's drunk"); and John Gielgud, upbraided by Coward for "overacting badly and using voice tones and elaborate emotional effects," takes it like a man: "I think it was like you to write like that and I do appreciate it."

This talent to disabuse is in large part the obverse of Coward's capacity for shrewd self-assessment. He had a firm sense of his professional skills, and usually took care not to overreach with them. The letter-writing showman sometimes gets his best effects playing against type, as when he reports to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne that the voice of a leading lady,

> to coin a phrase, sounds like someone fucking the cat. I know that your sense of the urbane, sophisticated Coward wit will appreciate this simile.

It was always important to make an impression and then get off. Coward wrote his biggest hits very quickly (*Hay Fever* in three days), and he liked them played the same way; in his correspondence, he sometimes reminds one of George Balanchine, wishing that the wretched players and his mixed-up friends would take things *faster, faster*. When he sailed the Mediterranean on the *Queen Elizabeth* in 1932, the ship's bandmaster delighted him by playing only songs composed by the most famous passenger on board. Even so, Coward borrowed the baton and upped the tempo.

Thomas Mallon is an *Atlantic* contributing editor. His latest novel, *Fellow Travelers*, was published last spring.

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BOOKS

Arthur Schlesinger's journals are predictably sycophantic—and surprisingly good.

The Courtier

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

On the last recorded occasion on which Arthur Schlesinger spoke with his hero John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the two men were flying from Washington to Amherst for a presidential address on "the place of arts in a democracy"—a speech on which Schlesinger had brought his agreeable skills and easy fluency to bear:

> We chatted about the Eisenhower reminiscences on the way up. The President commented on their self-righteousness. "Apparently he never did anything wrong," he said. "When we come to writing the memoirs of this administration, we'll do it differently."

When I reached this passage, which occurs at about the 200-page mark, I was so astonished that I put the book down for a moment. Obviously a journal must be true both to itself and to the day on which it was written, and there is little evidence that Schlesinger succumbed to any yearning to improve matters in hindsight. But it was as though he had stumbled on the truth and then picked himself up as if nothing had happened. The annoying legend and imagery of "Camelot" may not be exactly Schlesinger's fault (he actually expresses distaste for the Theodore White cliché), but he doesn't hesitate to compare the Kennedys' accession to power with the transition from Plantagenet to York—which is an odd way of historicizing the Eisenhower-Nixon period as well as the Kennedy interlude—and in countless other ways subordinates his dignity as a historian to the requirements of the courtier and even the apologist.

Yet these journals are quite disconcertingly good. For one thing, they are extremely illuminating, if often unconsciously so, in showing the diminishing returns to which the New Deal faction became subject in the postwar and Cold War periods. For another, they are humorous and often even witty, and show an eye for the telling detail and the encapsulating anecdote.

Most of all, they demonstrate how messy and approximate is the business of statecraft. Here, I remind you, is the empurpled way in which Schlesinger

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER with John F. Kennedy at the White House, 1962

RICKERBY/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

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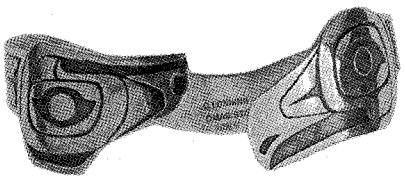

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wrote about JFK's comportment during the Cuba crisis in *A Thousand Days*:

> It was this combination of toughness and restraint, of will, nerve and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated, that dazzled the world.

But page through the entries for October 1962 in this journal and you will discover an administration hectically improvising, ill served by the "intelligence" services, alternating and oscillating, and uneasily aware that it is being outpointed by the boorish Khrushchev. If anyone emerges as cool and wise as well as smart, it is Averell Harriman. When writing about the more slow-motion confrontation with the Dixiecrats who did not want James Meredith to register at the University of Mississippi, Schlesinger the diarist shows us a president who dealt with such political bosses as if he, too, were merely another state governor trying persuasion. (Kennedy could be tougher when he had to be: Schlesinger was in the room when the Leader of the Free World complained to Martin Luther King and A. Philip Randolph that Sheriff "Bull" Connor "has done more for civil rights than almost anybody else," and that proposing a March on Washington was like forcing him to negotiate at gunpoint.)

JOURNALS: 1952–2000
by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.
The Penguin Press

Thus we learn again that what people set down day to day is of greater value than what they try to synthesize retrospectively into a grand sweep or theory. I do not think that Schlesinger would want his previous hero Adlai Stevenson to pass into history as a vain and weak and narcissistic type, but this is the impression that inexorably builds by way of a series of well-drawn miniature encounters. How can some people argue so confidently that Indochina was Johnson's war rather than Kennedy's when Schlesinger quotes LBJ, in December 1963, still holding "to his earlier views" and asking Mike Forrestal, "Don't you think that the situation in Vietnam is more hopeless today than it has ever been before?"

Coming down a bit in the scale of grandeur: Did Isaiah Berlin really describe Evangeline Bruce as "a bloody bore"? (If so, the bell tolls here for decades of the Georgetown "special relationship" smart set.) And were Schlesinger and Bobby Kennedy really "engaged in mock competition" for the fragrant Marilyn Monroe after the JFK birthday rally at Madison Square Garden in May 1962? There is a sort of sublime naïveté in the way Schlesinger records his Galahad's doings: Things that are now notorious are not so much airbrushed as unnoticed. Not a mention of the steep decline in the state of Kennedy's health and his marriage is allowed, and the name of Judith Campbell Exner, to give only one instance, is nowhere in the narrative at all.

Partisanship cannot be a complete explanation of this, nor can innocence. As the journals go on, and as American politics learns somehow to live without the Kennedys, Schlesinger learns to see through certain Democrats, even certain occupants of the White House. I would not have known, without reading the fascinating pages about the election of 1980, just how much Schlesinger and his circle had come to despise Jimmy Carter and to hope, in effect, for the election of Ronald Reagan. (It turns out that George McGovern, and every member of his family, had voted for Gerald Ford in 1976 to avert the horrible possibility of a Carter White House. In 1980, Schlesinger himself was for the witless Christian fundamentalist John Anderson—anyone but the cornball from Plains, Georgia, and his awful sidekick Zbigniew Brzezinski.)

Admittedly, much of this comes to us filtered through a dull blizzard of dinners and cocktails at Le Cirque and the Century Club and the Council on Foreign Relations, with a floating cast of vanden Heuvels and Plimptons and Styrons and Mailers. Every now and then, Schlesinger meets someone from outside his familiar charmed circle, like Mick Jagger or Abbie Hoffman, and emits a quasi-senescent whinny of astonishment that such people

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can talk and walk, but I never said he was another "Chips" Channon. The best running gag—every good diarist has one—starts in the spring of 1980, when Richard Nixon moves to East 65th Street in Manhattan, just over Schlesinger's garden fence, and provides some comic relief that draws the sting from the failure of Teddy Kennedy's grotesque campaign against Carter. From one such entry:

> Very few [Nixon] sightings ... though when I throw open the curtains in the morning, around 7 o'clock, a fire is usually blazing in his fireplace. Lest he get too much moral credit for rising so early it should be noted that the Nixons seem to dine around 6 o'clock, an hour or so before we start pre-prandial drinking, and the house is generally dark by 9. Not New York hours.

Schlesinger had written the Kennedy campaign's anti-biography of Nixon for the election of 1960, and had come to the view that he was

> the greatest shit in 20th century American politics (the "20th century" bit is pure scholarly caution; I cannot at the moment think of anyone in the 19th century quite meeting Nixon's combination of sanctimoniousness and squalor).

He is quite rightly indignant at the way in which Nixon "ended" U.S. participation in the Vietnam War in 1972, on terms no better than had been available in 1969 but after a hideous waste of life. Yet for Nixon's sinuous enabler in all this Schlesinger has nothing but praise. Henry Kissinger is continually recruited as a social partner, dinner guest, and general sage. In one 1982 entry, Schlesinger lavishes compliments on him for his memoirs and for his humanizing portrait of Nixon. Amusingly, Kissinger demurs and says that he regards Nixon as a poisonous manipulator. Again, it isn't obvious that Schlesinger understands that the irony, from a fellow member of the presidential-sycophants club, is at his expense. The exchange contains an anecdote well worth repeating. At Anwar Sadat's funeral, Ford had expressed disgust at Nixon's behavior and told

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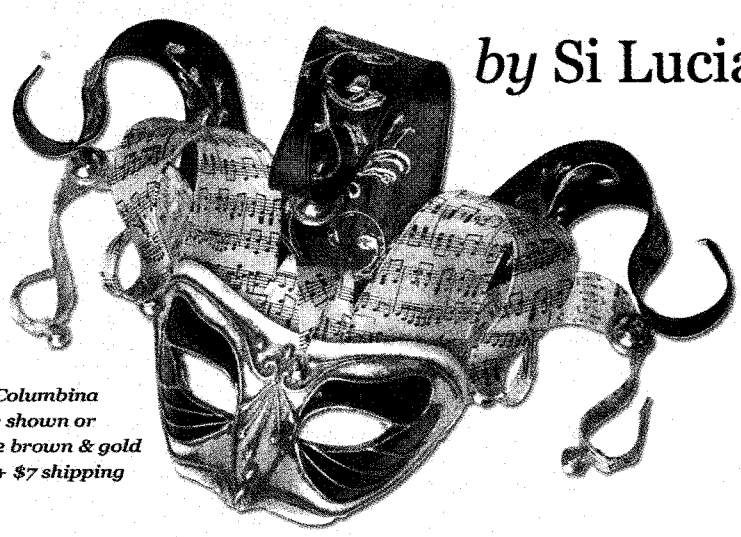
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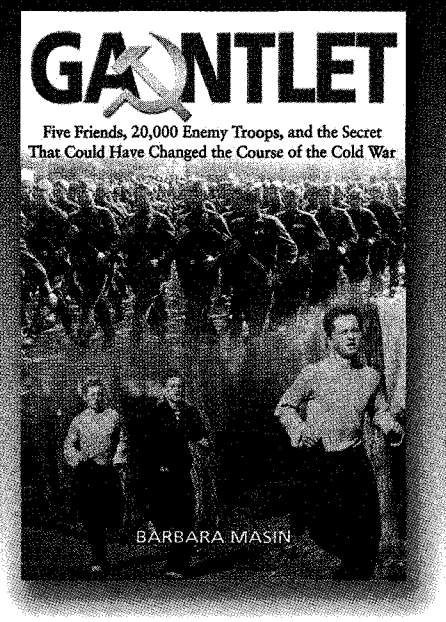

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Kissinger: "Sometimes I wish I had never pardoned that son of a bitch." Who would have thought that the hapless Ford administration would be so much the beneficiary of a Schlesinger memoir?

There is a disappointing absence of rancor here. Like Will Rogers, Schlesinger seems never to meet anyone for whom he can't find a good word. (I should declare an interest and say that I feature on a short "enemies list" of his, which otherwise consists of Gore Vidal, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Joan Didion, and John Gregory Dunne. He is very genial and lenient toward all of us, except Didion, and even she is forgiven when he meets her properly and finds that she has unsuspected qualities.) Such affability may be admirable, but it does slow things down a bit. Indeed, Schlesinger's good manners are almost masochistic. Of Vidal, he writes: "At least he knows me, which in a way legitimizes his right to attack me." Self-deprecation could do no more; still, one might ask for a little more gin in the martini.

'Sometimes I wish I had never pardoned that son of a bitch,' Ford is said to have told Kissinger.

Like Fabrizio in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, who could never work out whether he had been present for the Battle of Waterloo, Schlesinger gives us keyhole-sized insights into events in which he was a participant. He omits all mention of his participation in the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, and in the famous controversy over the covert funding of the magazine *Encounter*. (This seems to me to be mildly scandalous.) His slim record of the 1956 presidential campaign fails even to touch upon the Suez invasion and the Hungarian Revolution. He spares us any real account of November 22, 1963, and when in Chicago for the 1968 Democratic Convention, contents himself with recording that he once managed to get Teddy Kennedy on the phone after the line had been busy. This must have seemed important at the time, though the senator's subsequent remarks hardly seem worth preserving.

Denouncing Harriman for endorsing the detested Carter, Schlesinger commits another of his accidental innocences and writes:

> I know his penchant for staying in with Democratic Presidents, and with potential winners; but at eighty-eight he need not go out of his way to keep on good terms with power.

Schlesinger was then 62. By the time he turned 81, he was willing to make a fool of himself in public by testifying to Congress on Bill Clinton's behalf, saying that "gentlemen always lie about their sex lives"; Clinton was by no stretch of the definition a gentleman and was lying not about sex (which is done to protect the reputation of the woman) but about the women (which was done to defame them and to protect nobody but himself). Interestingly, the journals demonstrate that Schlesinger guessed right in private about Clinton's squalid mendacity; yet this did not prevent him from adopting a frankly partisan line, or from complaining to his diary that he was not often enough invited to the Clinton White House.

In a sentimental entry for Christmas 1983, he reflects that he might have written more books were it not for the demands of his children, but that he cannot regret the choice he made. This wistfulness is charming but self-deceptive: Schlesinger might have written not just more books but better ones (as we know from the quality of *The Age of Jackson* and *The Disuniting of America*) if he had not squandered so much time and energy being a compulsive socialite and an insecure *valet du pouvoir*.

Christopher Hitchens is an *Atlantic* contributing editor and a *Vanity Fair* columnist.

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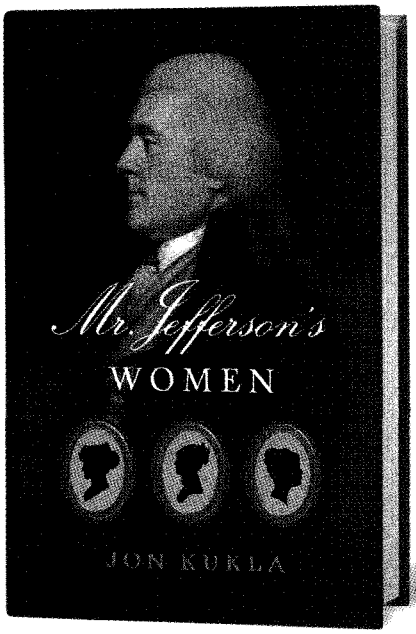

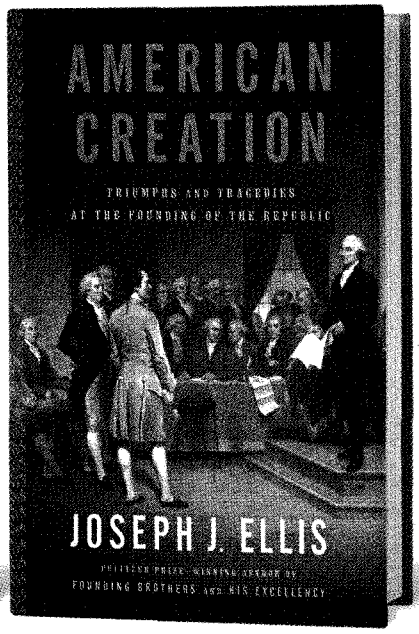

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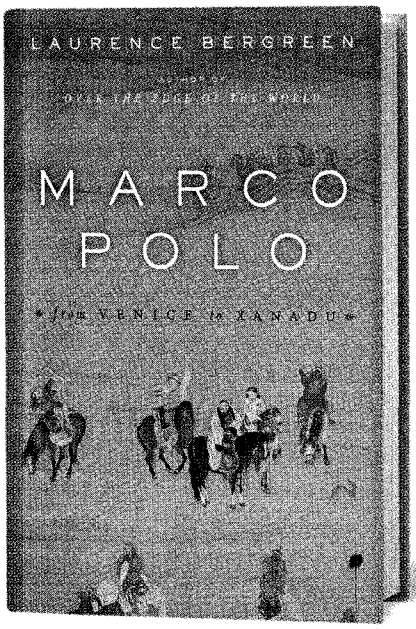

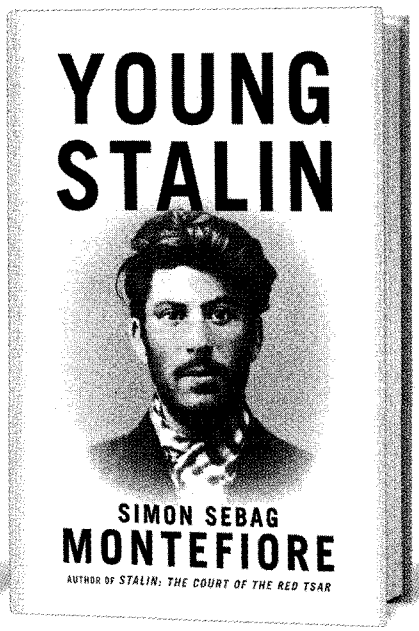

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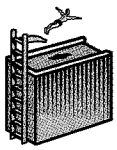

Slam
by Nick Hornby (Putnam)
Funny, empathetic, morally aware, attuned to popular culture and lingo, Hornby has always had the makings of a "young adult" novelist. His first foray into the genre features the poorly timed fatherhood of a likable teenage skateboarder. The product of a teenage relationship himself, our boy is more worried about telling his mother than about the consequences for his life, and, it turns out, rightfully so. As always in Hornby's world, just stepping up to the plate goes a long way, and though our hero ends up more overscheduled than he'd like, this is hardly a cautionary tale. Young-adult readers are in for the treat of Hornby's wit and warmth, but legions of more mature fans will be disappointed. This book lacks the counterpoint of melancholy and wistfulness that makes the humor of Hornby's adult novels so rich—the vague and troubling sense of time lost, never to be recovered, and of experience that forever leaves a dark mark. After all, how bad could anything be when most of life is still ahead?

A Free Life
by Ha Jin (Pantheon)
This engrossing chronicle of the contemporary Chinese immigrant experience is far more loosely structured and wide-ranging than Jin's National Book Award–winning novel, *Waiting*—for better and worse. But admirers of Jin's work will recognize his direct, unaffected style and slightly foreign rhythms, which suit his subjects. Jin decided to make America his home just after the Tiananmen Square massacre, and he uses that incident here as an impetus for his characters (a brooding man with literary aspirations and his wonderfully resolute wife) to break with China and make their lives in the United States. As the narrative moves the couple down the East Coast, trying out various jobs and circumstances, it accumulates the details of modern American life and illuminates the gradual maturation of a man's vision of freedom and success.

Cheating at Canasta
by William Trevor (Viking)
In this pensive short-story collection, the prolific Trevor exposes, with precision and grace, the complex motives underlying his characters' behavior. A wide range of voices—from teenage Irish working girls to urbane English gentlemen—create a fully realized world, discrete in its particulars but universal in its concerns. Clarifying without ever simplifying, Trevor is at his best when trafficking in guilt, doubt, deception, and shame. And though darkness pervades these stories—murder and blackmail, illness unto death, adultery, sins both careless and malicious—it never overwhelms them. Instead, it's tempered by hope, mostly in the form of human understanding and love, whose strength here owes far less to romance than to forgiveness and tolerance.

SOCIETY *and* CULTURE

Silent Movies: The Birth of Film and the Triumph of Movie Culture
by Peter Kobel, foreword by Martin Scorsese, introduction by Kevin Brownlow (Little, Brown)
Despite its lofty title, this is chiefly a picture book. The text thinly surveys the development of silent film in somewhat arbitrary sections—"Promotion and the Press," "The Art of Film," "The Stars." But, to quote the introduction by Brownlow (whose classic account *The Parade's Gone By* probes the subject far more profoundly), the book makes "an ideal introduction to the silent cinema," chiefly because of Kobel's delight in his subject and the splendid pictures from the Library of Congress's film collection—production stills and portraits, lobby posters, et al.; more than 400 illustrations in all—most of which will be new to readers.

The Great Funk
by Thomas Hine (FSG)
A sequel of sorts to the successful *Populuxe* (which smartly considered cultural curlicues of the 1950s and '60s), Hine's latest social history is half as satisfying. Taking the form of a quixotic quest, it strives—discursively—to vindicate the '70s by showing what the decade bequeathed to posterity (big cars and bad clothes, apparently—oh, and *Annie Hall*). A noble experiment, perhaps, but one that too often tests tendentious hypotheses: While it's hard to dispute the period's societal-nadir status (crime, oil, war, etc.), it's easy to dismiss the notion that *Jaws* is a post-Watergate allegory. Hine manages some nifty observations (particularly with regard to fashion and design), and his clean prose is never less than engaging, but it's all in the service of a thesis as scattershot as the "Me Decade" itself.

HISTORY

What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848
by Daniel Walker Howe (Oxford)
In this latest installment of the Oxford History of the United States, Howe has produced a comprehensive, richly detailed, and elegantly written account of the republic between the War of 1812 and the American victory in Mexico a generation later. This was a period of enormous change, not only in politics but in religion, economics, transportation, communication, social and intellectual culture, the very foundations of common life. And Howe covers it all—the Jacksonian and market "revolutions," the rise of

PETER HOEY

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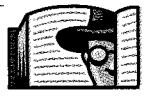
sectional tensions, westward expansion, the Transcendentalists, revivalism—through astute pen portraits, authoritative analysis, and gripping narrative. The Oxford series has been uneven, but this volume is a masterpiece.

The Whisperers
by Orlando Figes (Metropolitan)
Figes—author of the dazzling books *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* and *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*—presents a tapestry of the Stalinist era woven from the personal experiences and words of Soviet citizens, both betrayers and betrayed. As in his earlier works, the research is extensive and subtle, much of it here drawn from the outpouring of oral history in the 1990s, which he uses to elucidate the texture of daily life and the ways humanity was perverted by a regime of fear.

Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil
by Wallace Stegner (Selwa)
It might be a stretch to call this lost work—finished in 1956, published in 1971 (though only in Lebanon), promptly forgotten, and now reissued—a "classic," but "prescient" would be something like criminal understatement. Stegner, best known for his Pulitzer Prize–winning *Angle of Repose*, went to Saudi Arabia in 1955 to write a history of Aramco's early years. What resulted was a deeply reported, exquisitely sensitive account of the people who founded the company. More important to today's reader, it describes how oil was discovered in the region, why Ibn Saud allowed Western drilling in his kingdom, and how those two fateful facts have bound Saudis and Americans—politically, culturally, and economically—ever since.

BIOGRAPHY *and* MEMOIR

A Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years, 1917–1932
by John Richardson (Knopf)
A meticulous biography and a subtle art history in one handsome edition, this third volume in Richardson's ongoing study of Picasso's life and work maintains the level of hushed excellence achieved by its predecessors (and may even surpass them visually, in that its expansive gallery—a fine case of show *and* tell—reveals the master in his prewar prime, painting, drawing, and sculpting his way through France and Spain). This time we find Picasso dabbling in the world of theater, cavorting with the Lost Generation, and making his way to love and marriage (or something akin: wife, child, mistress). We also get considered looks at *Three Musicians*, *Crucifixion*, and many other masterworks. In lesser hands such an ambitious project might err on the side of overmuch, but Richardson's calm, doctorly ones deliver yet another magisterial winner.

Mandela: A Critical Life
by Tom Lodge (Oxford)
This brief, incisive study by a distinguished British political scientist is the best overall assessment of Mandela to date. Lodge is superbly attuned to the shoals and eddies of South African politics—old and new—and is equally adept at analyzing his complex subject. Readers who want to understand Mandela's symbolic and actual achievements—and what he failed to accomplish during his presidency—will find more information, insight, and judgment in this slim volume than in the many weightier titles devoted to this protean figure.

Mr. Basketball: George Mikan, the Minneapolis Lakers, and the Birth of the NBA
by Michael Schumacher (Bloomsbury)
Proof that size does matter, at least in Dr. Naismith's game, Mikan was the original "big man": A 6-foot-10 gentle giant, he prefigured Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Shaquille O'Neal; prompted league rule changes to accommodate his size; and later helped found the American Basketball Association (which in turn helped make the NBA a vast, multibillion-dollar sporting empire). Few such archetypal athletes have received such scant biographical due, and Schumacher wades into the breach with an exhaustively researched work of richness and rigor. His occasional lapses into hyperbole (the modulated hubris of the title is a good indicator) notwithstanding, this is a detailed, atmospherically true tale of tallness.

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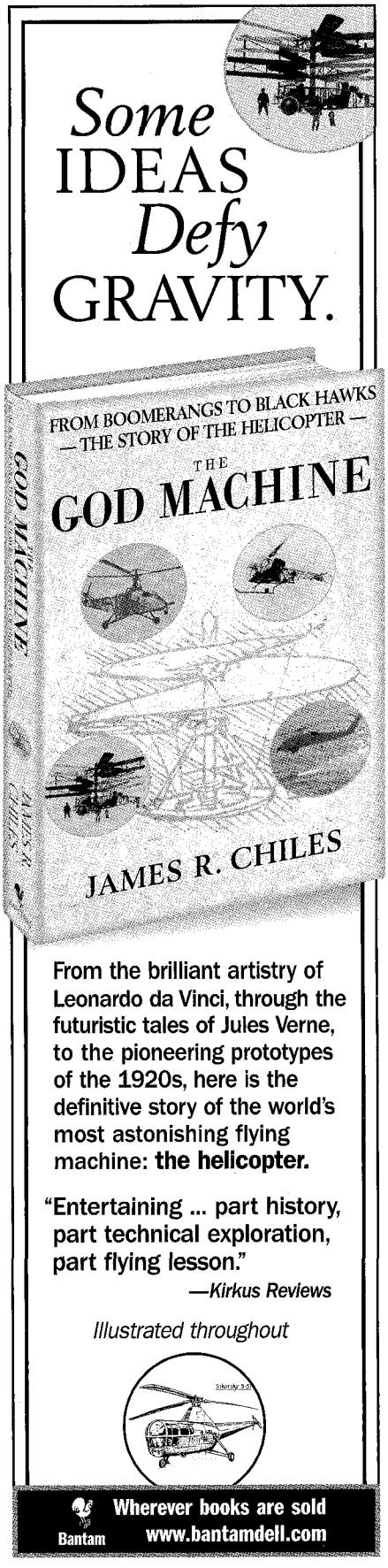

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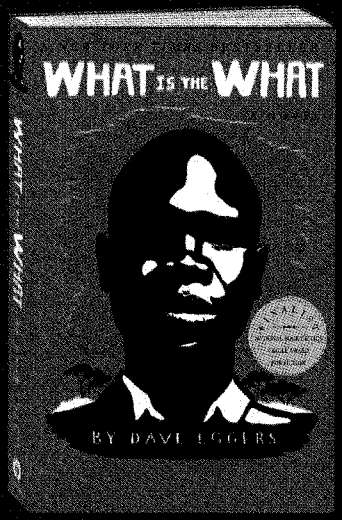

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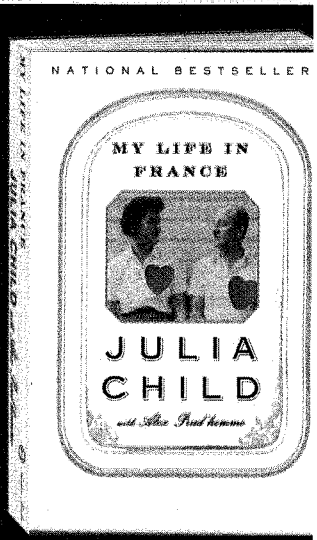

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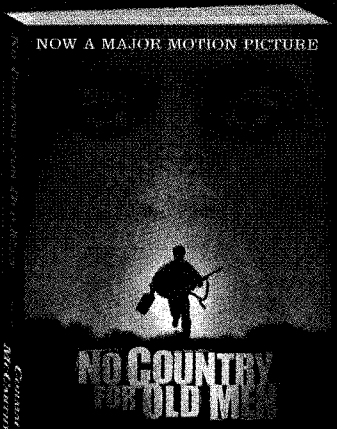

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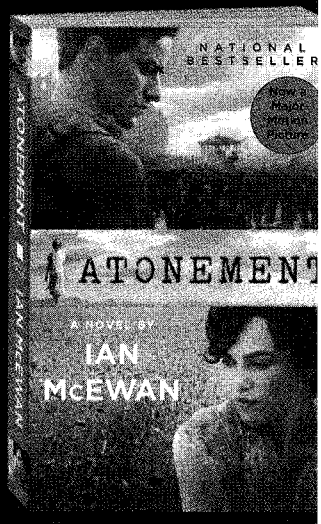

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TRAVELS

Our cub reporter exposes China's soft underbelly.

Among the Pandas

BY JAMES FALLOWS

Everyone knows that pandas are cute.

Very few people know firsthand how cute pandas are in quantity. Only 12 pandas exist in the United States, rented from the Chinese government for $1 million per year apiece (and some extra fees) and spread out among four zoos. The world's other zoos outside China hold only two dozen or so more. When glimpsed by visitors, these pandas are usually on their own, making themselves scarce behind tree stumps or chewing resignedly on bamboo. At best we see a mother panda with her cub.

The one place on Earth where giant pandas can be seen close-up and in large numbers is the Wolong Nature Reserve in southwestern China, in the mountains of Sichuan province that lead up to the Tibetan plateau. This part of China has more than 20 panda reserves and breeding centers; Wolong differs from the others in the scale and success of its breeding program. Some 120 baby pandas have been born at the reserve since it was founded, in 1980—at least 45 of them in the past three years. (About 1,600 pandas exist in the wild.)

When my wife and I visited, in August, Wolong's panda population was more than 60. The youngest was three days old, hairless and bleating and looking alarmingly (and non-cutely) like a turtle without its shell. Another in the nursery, about a week older, had just started to fill in its distinctive black-and-white fur. Each had been the "rejected" panda from a recently born set of twins. Mother pandas frequently have two offspring and decide within minutes which to rear. In the wild, the rejected twins quickly die. Wolong has nursed many of them to maturity; learning to do so was one of its breakthroughs as a breeding center. In some cases this has involved switching twins back and forth to the mother, so that she devotes some attention to each.

The oldest panda at Wolong, in the "elder-care" section, was truly aged—more than 30 years old—and barely moving. Pandas typically live about 15 years in the wild, and into their 30s in captivity. In addition to living longer, captive pandas are bigger and heavier than wild ones, since they're given apples, carrots,

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For an author-narrated slideshow of Wolong, visit www.theatlantic.com/pandas.

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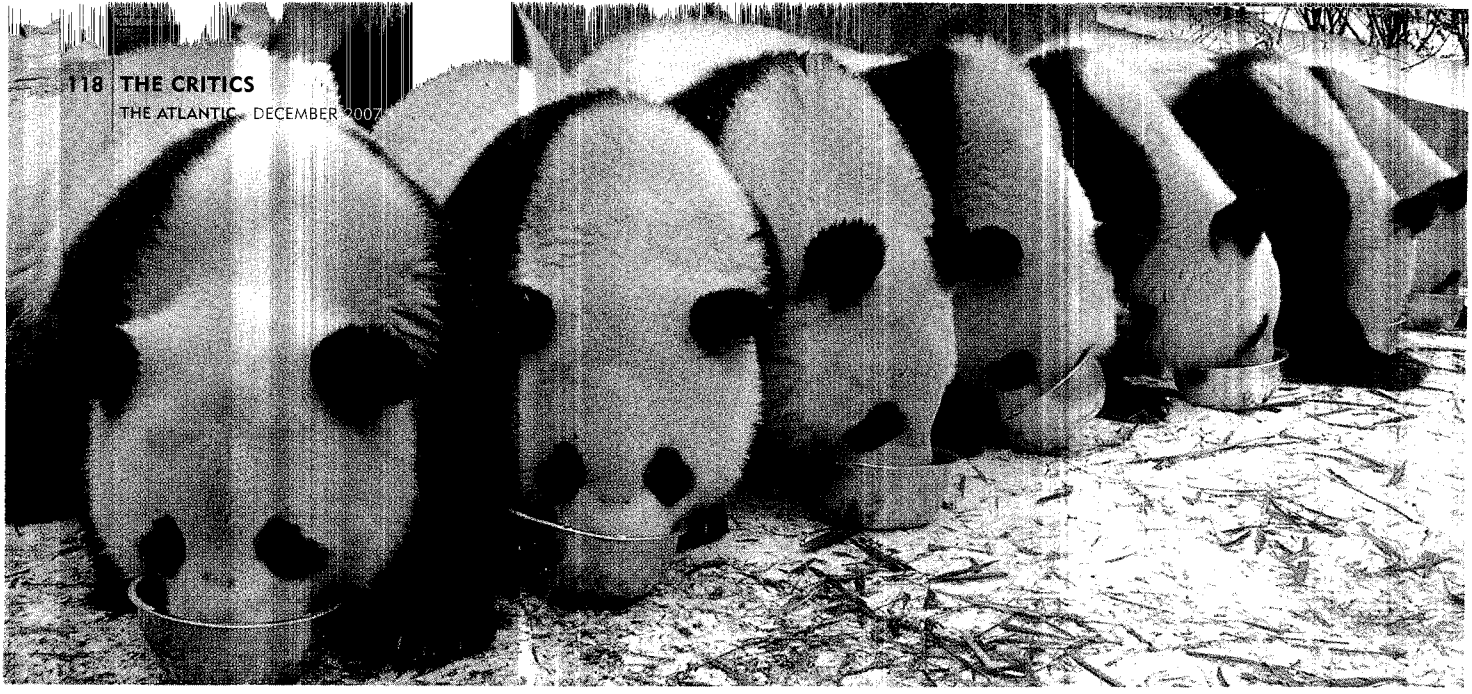

special bread, and other supplements to the basic fare of low-nutrition bamboo.

The center was brimming with young-to-adolescent pandas, ages 1 to 3, who spent all day in large common pens, where they wrestled, climbed on trees, napped in trees, hung from branches, fell off branches, batted each other in the head, pushed each other off rocks, and generally resembled a playground full of much-cuter-than-normal kindergartners.

After my wife and I had followed the action in one pen for an hour or so, the reserve's chief veterinarian, Tang Chunxiang, joined us. Tang, who's in his early 50s and has been at Wolong since soon after its start, is widely credited for pioneering its breeding techniques. "The more I work with the panda," he said, in English, "the more I love the panda."

In emphasizing the animals' adorability, I don't mean to trivialize the work of the Wolong center. The plain fact is that pandas are so vulnerable in so many ways that they would certainly have become extinct if people did not consider them so appealing, thereby justifying great efforts on their behalf. The biggest challenge, of course, is loss of habitat; others include pandas' well-publicized breeding difficulties and their reliance in the wild on a food, bamboo, that dies out periodically.

Poachers have eliminated exotic animals in much of China. This is one problem pandas do not face; I was told by two local people that villagers would be rewarded as much as a year's pay for bringing a sick or wounded panda to the Wolong center. Tang says this is not true; even so, the belief that it is may induce pro-panda behavior. Pandas get sick easily, mainly for digestive-tract reasons. Baby pandas in the nursery must be frequently handled and rolled from side to side, like bread dough; otherwise their intestines can become flattened or distorted. (Mother pandas constantly dandle their infants for the same reason.) Adolescent pandas often suffer from a version of the bloat, when too much bamboo gets stuck in the wrong part of their system. Pandas put away up to 100 pounds of bamboo a day; it doesn't always work out well. During our two days at Wolong, we twice saw bloated 1-year-old pandas rushed to the emergency room.

So familiar is the concept of the vulnerable panda that it provides the subject for the center's one overtly agitprop message. This is a heroic life-size bronze statue, funded for some reason by the Annenberg Foundation in America, depicting the rescue of a sick panda. A strong and handsome young man, wearing the typical garb of the Qiang ethnic group, carries the huge, ailing animal in a basket on his back. The panda, though weak, holds on with one front paw across the man's shoulder. Keeping pace with them on one side is a comely young Tibetan woman holding an IV bottle aloft. On the other side is an even more attractive young man identified as Han Chinese and wearing a doctor's jacket and Clark Kent–ish scholarly glasses. The population around Wolong is mainly Tibetan; the plaque by the statue reminds us of the partnership and friendship between the Tibetan and Han peoples (plus the Qiang), united by love of the panda.

Wolong's mission is partly to breed pandas to expand the world's supply, so far a great success; partly to prepare pandas for release into the wild, so far a heartbreaking failure, about which I'll say more; and partly to make pandas available for viewing, which directly and indirectly builds support for panda-conservation efforts.

TOP: REUTERS/CHINA NEWSPHOTO/LANDOV; LEFT: AP PHOTO/XINHUA NIU YIXIN

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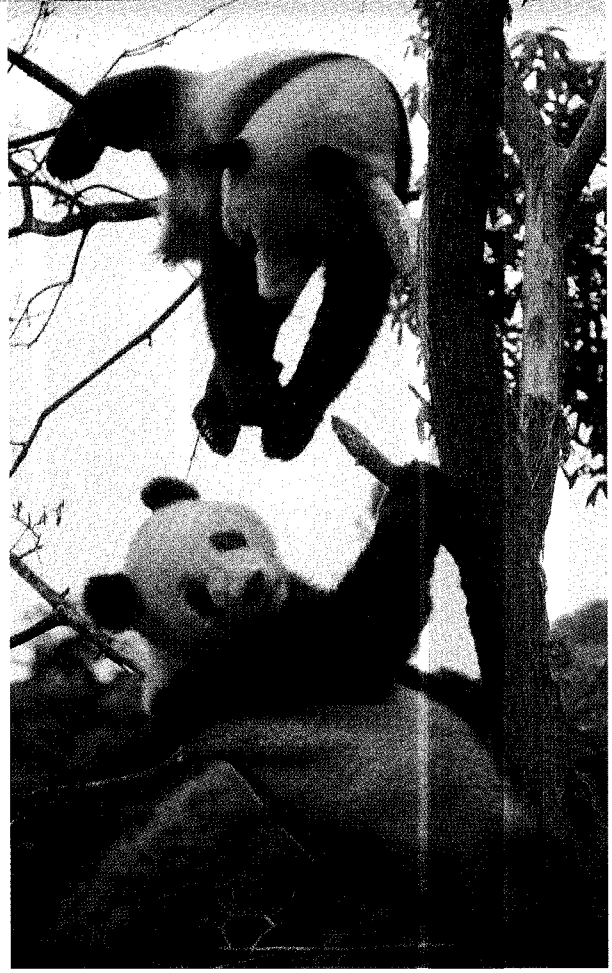

The direct support comes from the Chinese forestry department, as well as fees at the center. Wolong is a hard place to get to, and by the time visitors arrive, most are willing to make an extra investment to get close to the pandas. It costs 1,000 RMB ($133) to enter the pasture with the adolescent pandas and play with them for a few minutes. This can be more exciting than some people anticipate. The young pandas seem as harmless as a bunch of puppies, but they are solid, frisky, and numerous, and we saw them unintentionally knock down slight Japanese women several times. To protect the pandas, visitors are sprayed with an antiseptic solution and wear sterile gloves, bootees, and gowns.

For 400 RMB ($53), visitors can have a picture taken with a panda sitting next to them on a bench. It sounds improbable, but the pandas pose like pros, usually munching on a stick of bamboo, for picture after picture. When the photo shoot is over, they're back to tussling in the pen. According to *201 Questions About Giant Pandas*, a book I got at Wolong, pandas spend 98 percent of their time either sleeping or eating, leaving 2 percent for "wondering and enjoying."

The indirect support comes from the large fraction of visitors so moved by what they see that they leave donations for the center or "adopt" a panda, underwriting all or part of the average $5,000 yearly cost for each animal's food and medicine.

For me, the biggest surprise at Wolong was that pandas can be so active and sociable, at least when young. Nearly as startling is their Slinky-like flexibility. The Chinese name for panda is *da xiongmao*, or "big bear-cat," and the resemblance to cats is strongest in the pandas' seemingly boneless ability to contort themselves into any shape. Like cats, they relax in any posture they find convenient at the moment. They climb agilely up trees and then seem to ooze their way down. Like penguins, they are very graceful in one medium—water for penguins, trees for pandas—but awkward on land.

In talking about nearly every aspect of his pandas, Tang was cheerful and upbeat. "What are their personalities like?" he asked. "Just like human beings! Some are friendly. Some are lonely. Some are interested only in food, and once they get it they relax."

At one point only did his mood darken—when we discussed Xiang Xiang. This was a young male panda that had been carefully prepared for release into the wild, but died early this year, 13 months after his release, apparently after a fight with other male pandas. Tang spoke of Xiang Xiang almost like a child lost in battle. "When Xiang Xiang still had his GPS [tracking collar], all looked very good. No one had invaded his territory. He was strong. But we know that if he meets an adult male wild panda, Xiang Xiang cannot win the fight."

Wolong is creating a 75-acre enclosure where pandas will live for several years, as a sort of halfway house before release. In the future, only lone females or male-female pairs will be released, to avoid conflict with dominant wild males. ("Males often fight to control four or five females," Tang said. "We will add the natural resource, the female, not the natural competitor, another male.") And they may be introduced in areas where wild pandas once existed but no longer do.

"Any scientific study is not smooth," Tang said stoically. "We learned from Xiang Xiang. We will continue to try our best."

To see what their efforts have wrought, it's worth the trip to Wolong.

James Fallows is an *Atlantic* national correspondent.

THE TRAVEL ADVISORY

To get to Wolong, you must first get to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province and a city well worth a day or two for its food, its temples and extensive gardens (especially that of the poet Du Fu), and its teahouses, where people really do spend afternoons playing mah-jongg or bursting into song.

Wolong is roughly four hours of difficult driving west from Chengdu, up into the mountains on a twisting road now undergoing major repairs. We made our arrangements through the Chengdu travel agent Peter Woo (Peter@WestChinaAdventures.com). For about $380, we hired a car and driver for the trip up and back, plus two nights at the Wolong Hotel, five miles away. It is a "four-star" hotel minus some of what that would imply elsewhere (e.g., coffee, Internet service of any kind)—but hey, pandas!

Most foreigners who see how modestly the panda center is run, and how much it relies on donations, wonder how they can help. The main U.S.-based conduit for tax-deductible contributions is www.pandasinternational.org.

GETTY IMAGES

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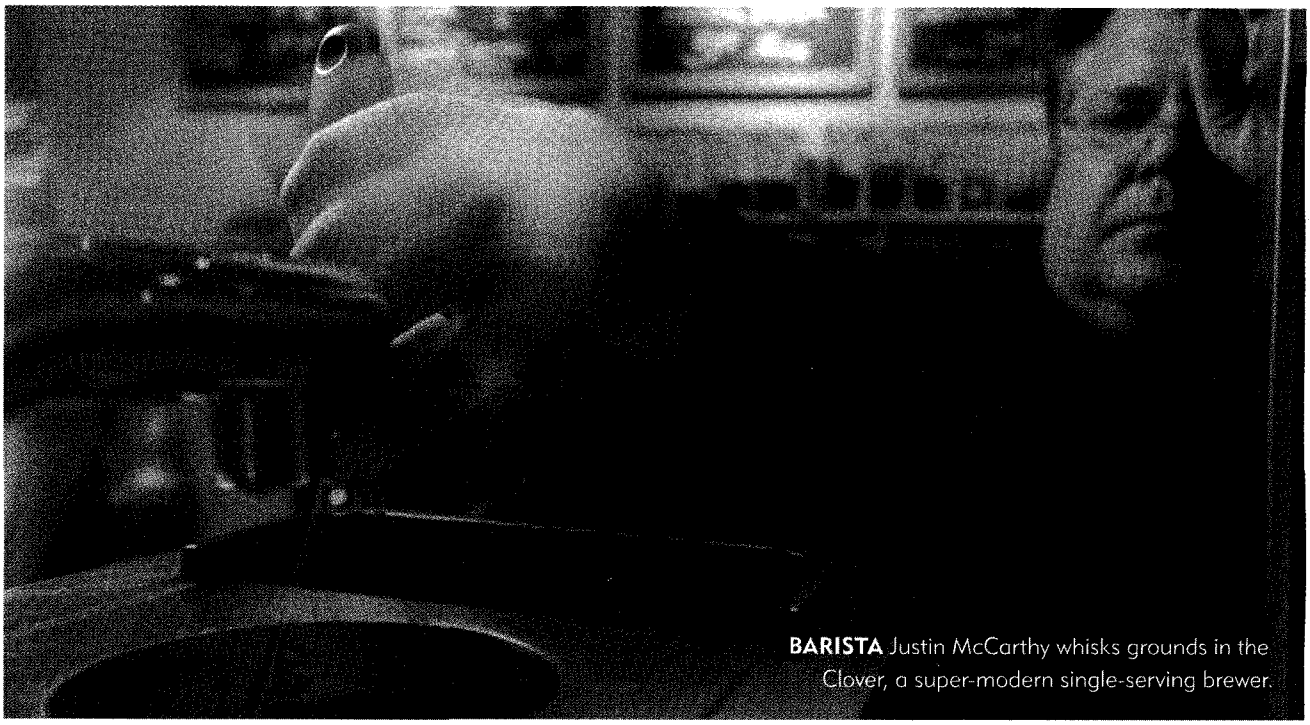

BARISTA Justin McCarthy whisks grounds in the Clover, a super-modern single-serving brewer.

MARK OSTOW

FOOD

Cool new coffeemakers bring out the deeper pleasures of a light roast.

The Magic Brewing Machine

BY CORBY KUMMER

When the Starbucks steamroller passed over the land, coffee was enjoying a renaissance sparked by Alfred Peet, who opened his first coffee roaster and shop in the Berkeley hills in 1966 and showed Americans a world of flavors beyond the bland blends they were used to. Peet's Coffee & Tea gave rise to the Gourmet Ghetto, whose most famous occupant was and is Chez Panisse. Peet died in August at 87, his legacy already assured by those who trained with him—including the three founders of Starbucks, one of whom, Jerry Baldwin, eventually bought Peet's. And now a new generation is picking up where they left off.

Peet had a passion for dark roasts—beans heated over a flame, turned constantly, for longer than was traditional in the United States or the northern Europe of his upbringing. He taught his students to roast beans with a subtlety and patient care that few can master. It's all too easy to char beans in the name of sophistication. The fixation with espresso and milk drinks came only with the Starbucks rollout.

The revolution Peet began was in full flower in the early 1990s, when I researched and wrote *The Joy of Coffee* (published in 1995 and revised in 2003), with mom-and-pop coffee shops springing up in most cities and many small towns. They largely disappeared once Starbucks started expanding in earnest. Now young roasters and baristas are filling Web sites with notes on their latest visits to small, fair-trade coffee farms and on the sleekest new equipment.

Less noted, but no less important, is a revived appreciation for lighter roasts. This is the gospel of George Howell, whose Coffee Connection became to the Northeast in the 1970s and '80s what Peet's was to the Northwest, but with far lighter roasts and an emphasis on brewed coffee rather than espresso and on single-origin coffees rather than the blends of beans from around the world that Peet made his signature. Like so many others, Howell bowed to Starbucks, selling them his name and shops in 1994 and agreeing not to market his own brand of coffee for seven years. He spent his noncompete years working in Brazil and several other coffee-growing countries, pointing producers toward methods for achieving high quality that had long been eroding.

MORE ON THEATLANTIC.COM
Watch a video about high-end coffeemakers at www.theatlantic.com/coffee.

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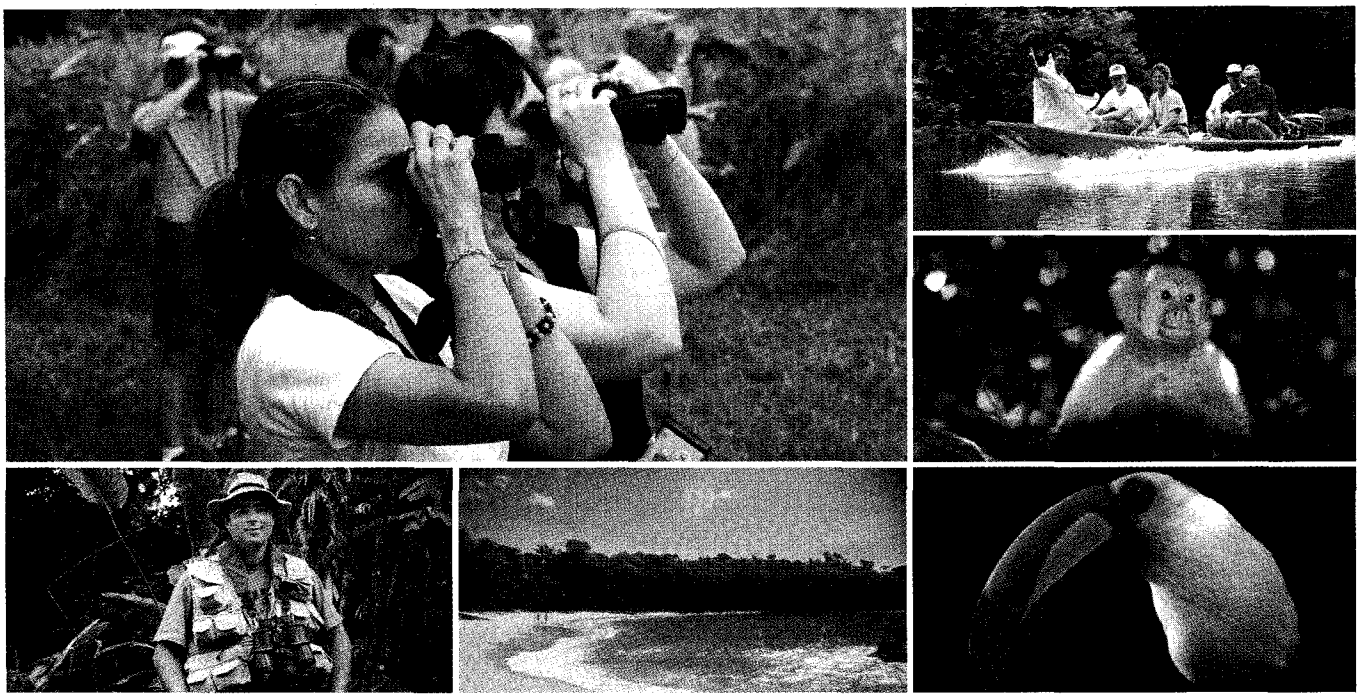

Clockwise starting top left: Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge; Tortuguero Park Canal Cruise; White Faced Monkey; Keel Billed Toucan; Manuel Antonio Park; Rainforest Hike

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To give them incentive, he helped create the "Cup of Excellence," a contest held in seven Latin American countries each year followed by an online auction in which roasters around the world pay high premiums for the winning beans, which are usually in short supply.

Now Howell is back, buying and roasting his own beans near Concord, the proud Colonial-era town near Boston, and baristas across the country are branching out from espresso to the kind of single-origin, lighter-roast coffees he has long championed. Howell has spent three decades honing his taste for clean, pure flavors in the cup and the fruity, singing "acidity" that in coffee terminology is a prized sign of beans raised at high altitudes and carefully picked and processed. His quest is ever for the "blackberry" intensity of beans from his favorite coffee-growing country, Kenya, and his analogy is ever to the subtle distinctions in wine. (Because he can't use the Coffee Connection name, many of the fans waiting for a Howell return don't know they can get his beans again—and the name he chose, Terroir Coffee, to evoke the specificity of wine, is hard to say. The name to bookmark is terroircoffee.com.)

A recent wave of excited blog entries about a professional brewing machine designed to showcase just these kinds of flavors had a jazzed charge usually reserved for the latest espresso maker. I knew I had to find one. It didn't look easy.

The Clover hit the coffee world with the force of a sexy stranger new in town. The stir was understandable. No coffee machine looks quite like it. The action is not in the front but on top, where customers can see it. And it is hypnotic. The barista grinds coffee for each cup and strews the measured grounds into a well with shiny silver walls and a fine-mesh screen at the bottom. A fixed faucet pours hot water over the grounds, and the server stirs the mixture using a flat plastic whisk (baristas swap secret Clover stirring techniques on Web sites). The coffee steeps, gurgling slightly, for 40 to 70 seconds. Without warning, the screen rises to the top of the machine. The brewed liquid is magically sucked beneath, leaving just the grounds at the top, which the barista rakes off with a silver-handled squeegee.

Sightings of the Clover—introduced two years ago by a Stanford-trained, Seattle-based product designer, Zander Nosler, and promoted by Anastasia Chovan (the coffee world abounds with great names)—have been rare. On the East Coast, the Brooklyn-based Café Grumpy (see what I mean about names?) has installed two at its Manhattan location, in Chelsea. Other shops on the coffee vanguard, like Intelligentsia, in Chicago, and Stumptown, in Portland, Oregon, a city that is to coffee today what Seattle was in the first flush of the Starbucks craze, feature them. But outside these coffee hubs the Clover, at an average of $11,000 apiece, is a snow leopard.

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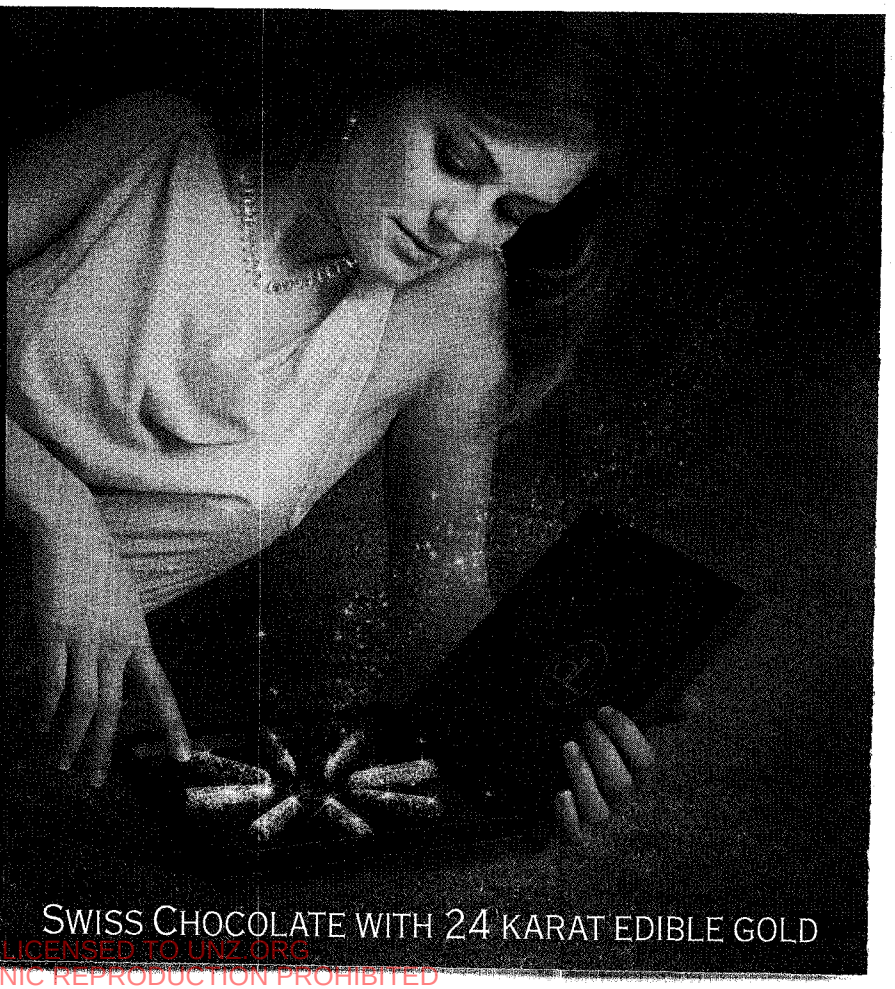

SWISS CHOCOLATE WITH 24 KARAT EDIBLE GOLD

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I clicked on a map at cloverequipment.com and found one machine in service in the Northeast: at a coffee shop less than a mile from where I live.

Justin McCarthy opened Velouria Espresso (he made up the name to evoke velvety coffee and to sound Italianate) last summer in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, a neighborhood open to new experiences. He knows by name and drink preferences the tattooed, *Mad Men*-horn-rimmed young customers I saw come in, bleary-eyed, at noon. McCarthy, who brews only beans from Howell, says he likes to tell customers, "Strong is not a flavor."

I kept ordering different coffees, less to sample them than to watch the machine, which had the appeal (if not the colored lights) of a vintage jukebox. Every time the screen rose majestically, I half expected a miniature band to be on it, à la Radio City. But the Clover has its limitations. It emphasizes acidity almost excessively, and I frankly preferred the same coffees in a standard Fetco filter-drip, an industrial machine in wide use.

Nosler told me that some coffees are "more forgiving than others," and that light roasts like Howell's are "harder to brew" on his machine—a problem he is working on. His main goal is to allow shop owners to "find a market for their gems," a reference to the high-quality, small-farm beans, including Cup of Excellence winners, that the new breed of café owners seek out like wine merchants. Caroline Bell, who owns Café Grumpy with her husband, Chris Timbrell, invested nearly $25,000 in two Clover machines, despite thinking that she could "buy a car or go on a really nice vacation" instead.

Brewing coffee to order brings some of the personalized glamour of espresso to the usually drab drip coffee, and it allows shop owners to take a chance on an expensive coffee. Prices are usually set by the weight of the coffee used per cup. At Café Grumpy that varies from $2 for a standard coffee to as much as $8 for a rare one. Brewing only in a Clover at the Chelsea shop (the one in Brooklyn still brews in a Fetco, or individually in a plunger pot) was a risk: New York customers might chafe at the wait and at having to pick one of half a dozen kinds of beans. But a wait time one barista estimated at 1 minute 20 seconds, and a staff able to explain the differences between beans, brought Café Grumpy the loyalty Bell had hoped for: "If you're interested in complex flavors—good complex flavors, I mean—you won't want anything else."

Good complex flavors are Howell's specialty, and ones that dark roasts, with their brute power and body, generally obliterate. Light roasts show best when brewed at high temperatures and relatively quickly. This is why he sells only the Technivorm brewer, a Dutch machine that has long been the gold standard for brewed coffee. I brought a few standard home-brewing machines to Howell's headquarters for what I thought would be a straightforward taste test against the Technivorm. Peter Lynagh, a young man who moved from Austin to fulfill a dream of apprenticing with Howell, and Vince Fedele, an engineer and longtime Coffee Connection fan who is Howell's chief operating officer, became somewhat obsessed, comparing heat cycles and flavor profiles. So did Howell, who was just back from Colombia. What Lynagh and I thought would be a morning turned into three very long, highly caffeinated days.

The Technivorm delivers results that professionals demand: consistency batch after batch, whether in small or large quantities. It is particularly well suited to lighter roasts. Water at 197 to 201 degrees Fahrenheit, the temperature at which Fetco and similar professional, but few home, machines brew (home machines generally don't get above 185 or so), brings out the greatest range of flavors in coffees with high acidity—the fruity, desirable kind. These are the flavors that come out in the marathon "cupping" sessions roasters stage constantly, steeping ground coffee in hot water and, after a set time, "breaking the crust" and allowing the grounds to settle to the bottom of the cup.

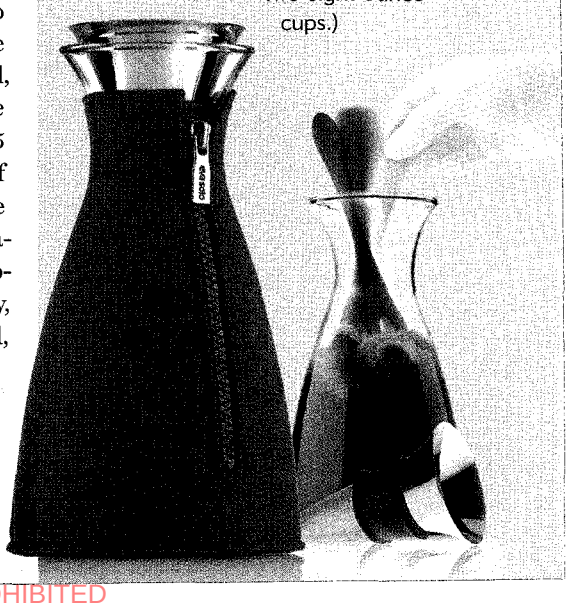
Fedele asked Lynagh to measure water temperature at every stage of

DO IT YOURSELF

The CafeSolo, another sexy newcomer to the brewing world, is an alternative to a plunger pot—a low-tech way to brew that involves pouring hot water over ground coffee, stirring, and pouring the brewed coffee through a filter after four minutes of steeping. In place of the glass cylinder of the plunger pot, which is easy to break if the coffee is too finely ground, is a curvaceous, sturdy flask with a flared top (a ringer for the carafe that used to come with mix-it-yourself Italian dressing), and instead of a screen attached to a plunger is a fine-mesh metal funnel that goes almost all the way down into the coffee mixture.

The official reason for the enthusiasm is a cup that shows off the high notes of a medium- or light-roast coffee better than the plunger pot, which is best suited to a darker roast, and that has body almost as full but with less sediment (the mesh is finer than the screen in many plunger pots). And the pot comes with its own, effective way to keep coffee warm—a tight neoprene jacket with a big zipper—though you shouldn't let the finished coffee sit for more than 10 to 15 minutes, because it continues to brew and grows sour.

The real reason is the cool Danish design and the frankly suggestive motion of using that zipper. (Available online at around $80 for the 0.6 liter size or $100 for the 1 liter; I'd recommend the smaller one, which makes two eight-ounce cups.)



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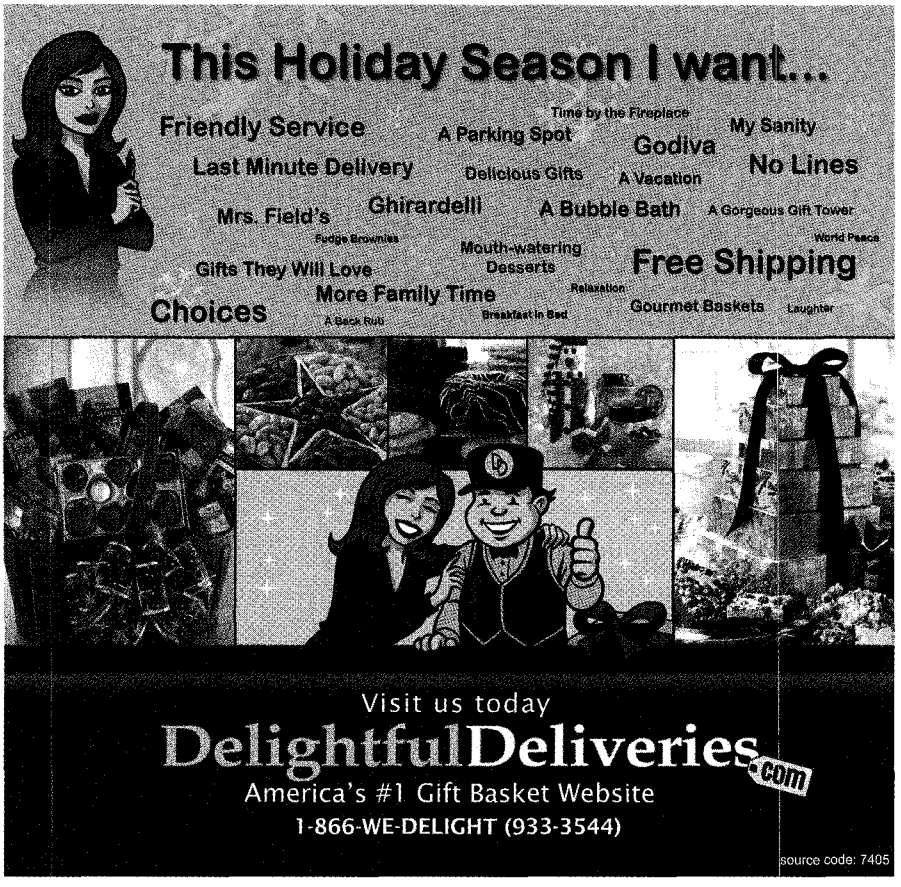

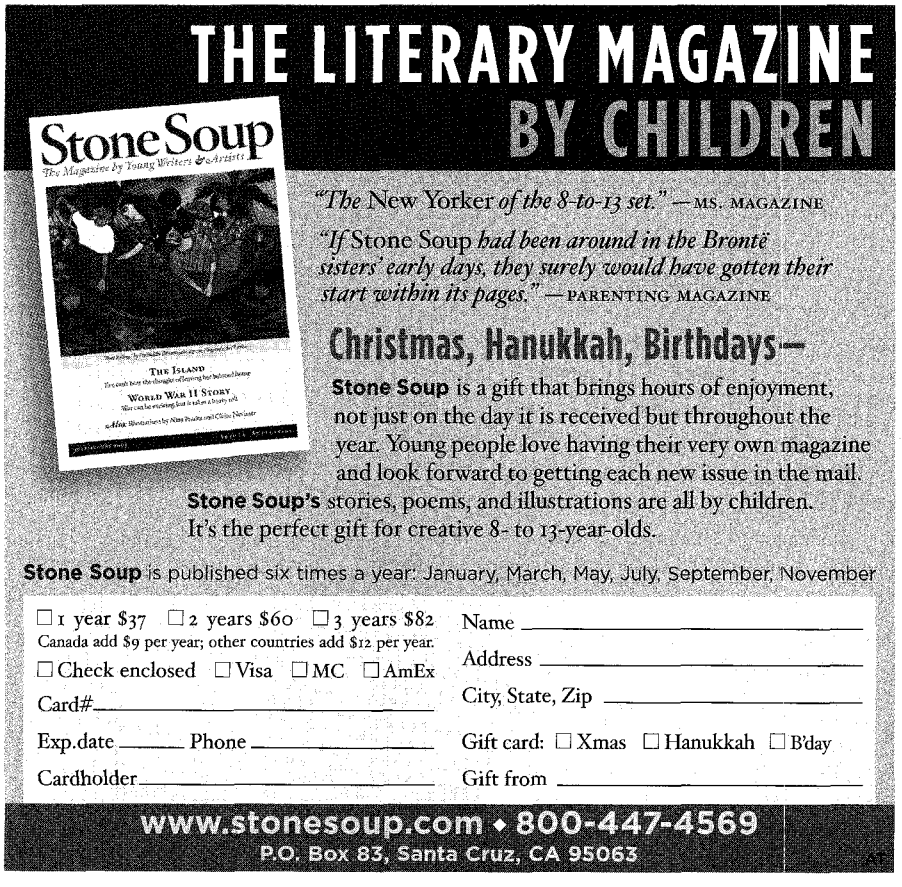

the cycle, and then plotted the results on a graph. (He posted it at terroircoffee.com.) The Technivorm won, as it did most but not all of the blind taste tests. The brewer that got up to a high temperature most consistently after it, a Capresso, was generally but not always second in the taste tests. Sometimes a Braun I picked up at the hardware store was, and sometimes an inexpensive Mr. Coffee; sometimes the Technivorm itself came in second. "I'd drink all of them," Lynagh remarked after the first round on the third day. Given that Lynagh had paid $179.50 for the Capresso at Williams-Sonoma, and terroircoffee.com sells a terrific-looking Technivorm for $215, the Technivorm seems a clear choice if you plan to explore the world of light roasts and are willing to spend more than, say, $60 to $80 for a brewer.

The coffee in the tests really showed its stuff when it cooled to near room temperature. This is the telltale point for any coffee, and it marks a sharp division between dark roasts, which start out mouth-fillingly rich but tend to become bitter and flat when they cool, and light roasts, which can start out fruity and thin but go on to develop a light, syrupy body (Howell calls it "buttery"). At the cooling point, the Technivorm brews always stayed true.

The Technivorm isn't for everyone. Though the neat new design has a smaller footprint than its predecessors, it's still deeper and taller than most home brewers. The precise heating control that brings out the full spectrum of flavors is best suited to what the Italians call *vini di meditazione*. Even Howell admits that his palate is at its sharpest in the morning, when he claims to spend a full 45 minutes pondering his first cup of coffee. After dinner he's just as happy with a sediment-filled, thick cup (light roast, of course) from a French press pot.

Anyone thinking of meditating over a morning cup of coffee should try out a Technivorm. Start with a Kenyan from Terroir, and you'll soon see what keeps Howell cupping in Concord and Kenya.

Corby Kummer is an *Atlantic* senior editor.

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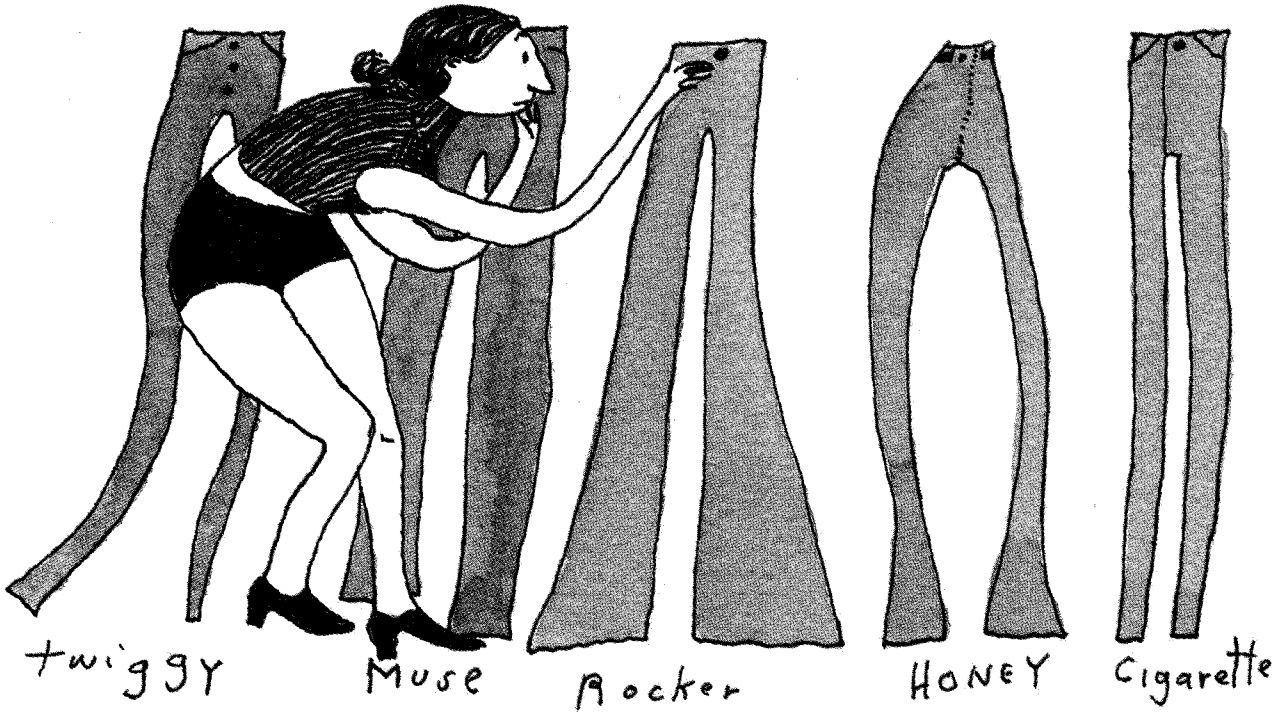

BLAIR THORNLEY

CULTURE AND COMMERCE

Why sending a man to the moon is easier than finding jeans that fit

Rightsize Me

BY VIRGINIA POSTREL

As a teenager, I squeezed into size-12 jeans. Over the past three decades, I've put on about 20 pounds, mostly below the waist. I now wear a size 6. People in the garment business call that bit of flattery "vanity sizing." Sizes aren't what they used to be.

But some things haven't changed. No matter how low the digit on the hang tag, trying on clothes is still a frustrating, even traumatic, experience. Though designed as a mere convenience, clothing sizes establish an unintended norm, an ideal from which deviations seem like flaws. There's nothing like a trip to the dressing room to convince a woman—fat, thin, or in between—that she's a freak. Her torso is too long for the jacket or too short for the dress. Her arms are too short for the blouse that fits her bust. Her seat is too flat for the pants that hug her waist. Her hips nearly split the skirt that fits her waist. The more tailored the garment, the greater the problem. (Men's clothes are easier, because they tend to be looser and because, as one industry expert puts it, men "have fewer bumps.") Jeans are particularly troublesome. With its body-hugging fit, America's egalitarian uniform provides little room to hide deviations from the norm.

And nobody's normal. Sizes are standardized. Bodies aren't.

Clothing sizes reflect a classic modern dilemma, a conflict between human heterogeneity and mass production. Standardized sizes made inexpensive, off-the-rack garments economically feasible. They gave shoppers a reliable guide to finding clothes in self-service shops. (Historically, the biggest advocates for standard sizes were mail-order catalogs, whose customers couldn't try on the clothes they were buying.) Standardized sizes seemed efficient and scientific. Clothes could be as predictable as screws or frozen peas—and as regimented and impersonal as an assembly line.

From the 1940s through the 1970s, the U.S. government established and maintained size guidelines, using data from about 16,500 women, including 6,500 members of the Women's Army Corps measured during World War II. The guidelines specified the proportions that defined, say, a Misses 12 or a Junior 7. These standards were always voluntary, however, and over time they broke down. As Americans got fatter, garment makers discovered the marketing wonders of vanity sizing. Equally important, makers of different brands found that different proportions—a larger waist-hip ratio or narrower shoulders—could attract loyal customers who fit that profile. Every deviation from the standard

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represented a potential market niche. Although individual brands still adhere to in-house size standards, competition killed national standards. The government got out of the size-specifying business in 1983, and nowadays only sewing patterns adhere to the old sizes.

Those sizes weren't all that efficient at fitting the population anyway. In 2002 and 2003, an industry consortium called $[TC]^2$, originally the Textile Clothing Technology Corporation, used computerized 3-D scanners to collect precise measurements from about 6,300 women and 3,600 men. Unlike the young, almost entirely Caucasian women in the government's earlier research, these subjects represented a broad cross section of the population. The most striking result: Not many American women have the hourglass figures assumed by most apparel sizes. This is a question of shape, not weight; a recent study in South Korea, where women are much smaller, found that hourglass proportions are even rarer there.

More significantly, $[TC]^2$ scanner data revealed just how varied body shapes are. The scanners use white-light beams to create a body-shaped "point cloud" of 40,000 data points that captures not only about 200 different body measurements, including six different ways of measuring the waist, but also posture and left-right asymmetries—much richer data than a tape measure can collect. "When you scan someone, you get an image on the screen made of *X*-, *Y*-, and *Z*-coordinate data that is assembled on the screen. *You have that person*," says Susan Ashdown, a professor in the department of fiber science and apparel design at Cornell University and a leading researcher in the small community of scholars trying to improve clothing fit. You can't recognize yourself from a list of measurements; you can from a point cloud, because everyone's body is different.

"There's an incredible amount of variation, much more than we're aware of," says Ashdown. "When we see a clothed population, we don't really see the range of shapes that are underneath that clothing. Thank goodness." Clothing creates the illusion that bodies fit an aesthetically pleasing norm. And that illusion depends on getting the fit right. Garments that bunch, pull, or sag call attention to figure flaws and often make people look worse than they would without clothes.

In a tough apparel market, "better fit" has become the latest competitive weapon. Some garment makers are simply tweaking the proportions of their standard sizes to include more people, by, for example, enlarging waists or not automatically making legs and sleeves longer as torsos get wider. (The easiest way to fit more customers with the same number of garments is to make waists a bit larger, reducing the difference between waist and hip measurements.) Others have explicitly expanded their fit offerings, selling several different proportions in each size. Lane Bryant recently introduced three categories for each size of jeans: yellow, red, and blue, corresponding to different waist-hip ratios, with descriptions posted prominently in store windows. Many brands mingle sizing and style variations. In the Joe's Jeans lineup of Chelsea, Cigarette, Honey, Lover, Muse, Provocateur, Rocker, Socialite, Starlet, and Twiggy styles, each features not only specific proportions but also a specific leg shape and rise.

By reducing standardization, all these approaches raise manufacturing and inventory-management costs. And, as the dizzying list of Joe's styles suggests, more variety can confuse shoppers.

There's nothing like a trip to the dressing room to convince a woman—fat, thin, or in between—that she's a freak.

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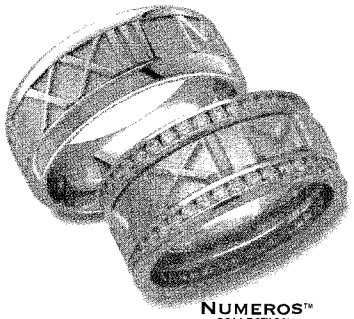
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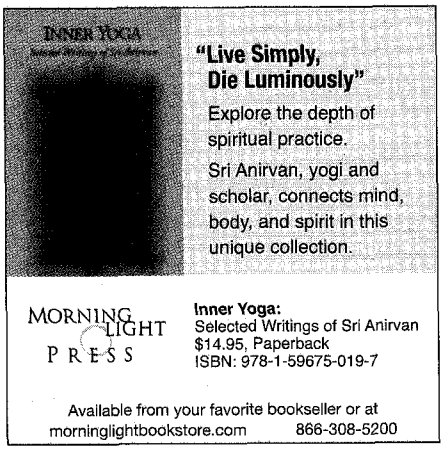
Instead of the old conflict between mass production and individuality, we now face a new, postmodern problem: a conflict between choice, which accommodates human variation, and information overload. Proportions vary enough by brand and style to promise a good, or at least a better, fit for just about everyone, if you look hard enough. But looking takes time, effort, and mental energy.

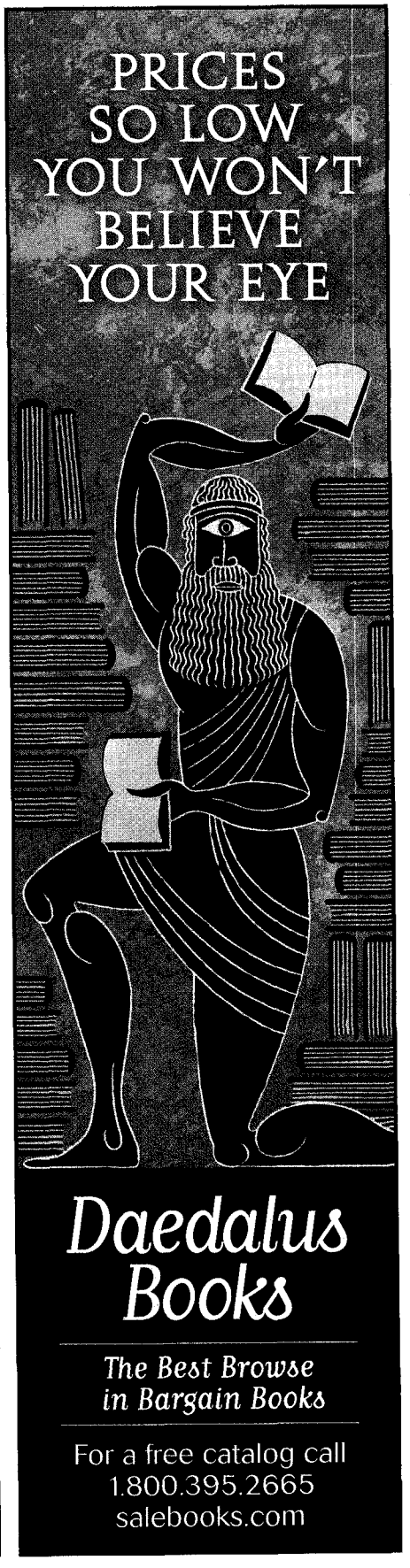
In his 2004 book, *The Paradox of Choice*, the Swarthmore psychologist Barry Schwartz uses shopping for jeans as his kickoff example of too much choice. When his old jeans wore out, Schwartz went to the Gap to pick up a new pair, only to confront five fit choices in every size: slim, easy, relaxed, baggy, and extra baggy. He agonized over which was right for him:

> Finally, I chose the easy fit, because a "relaxed fit" implied that I was getting soft in the middle and needed to cover it up. The jeans I chose turned out just fine, but it occurred to me that buying a pair of pants should not be a daylong project ... Before these options were available, a buyer like myself had to settle for an imperfect fit, but at least purchasing jeans was a five-minute affair. Now it was a complex decision in which I was forced to invest time, energy, and no small amount of self-doubt, anxiety, and dread.

Not everyone, of course, will recognize the good old days when purchasing jeans was a five-minute affair. (I certainly don't.) For many customers, having explicit labels reduces trial and error. Instead of going from store to store and brand to brand trying on garments in search of one with proportions close to your own, you can narrow the search to those that at least claim to resemble your shape. And, unlike Schwartz, not everyone is satisfied with clothes that bag or pinch. Surely we can do better than forcing everyone back into the old ill-fitting molds. Schwartz's social criticism suggests an entrepreneurial opportunity.

Why not scan shoppers and let them order clothes that fit perfectly? A London company called Bodymetrics offers just such a service, with scanning "pods"





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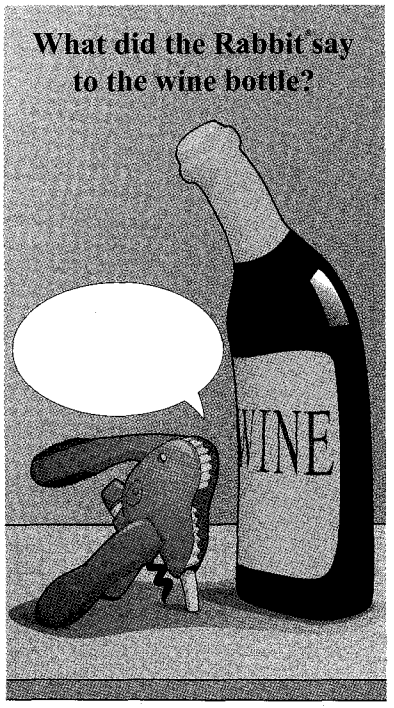

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in Selfridges. But Bodymetrics jeans are pricey, £450, or about $900, a pair. No matter how high-tech the measurement process, custom clothes are extremely labor-intensive. There's a reason mass customization hasn't swept the jeans business. Pattern pieces aren't as modular as Dell computer components. Changing a hem is relatively easy. Changing proportions, like the distance between the knee and the hip or the exact curve of the butt, is much trickier. Each piece has to be revised, and then the pieces have to go together smoothly. Designing and cutting a new pattern for every customer eliminates many of the economies of industrial production.

A more promising approach is to use scanner data to match a customer's shape with a store's inventory, a service Bodymetrics also offers. Fit experts envision a future in which you'd carry your body scan in your cell phone or on a thumb drive, using the data to order clothes online or find them in stores. But who's going to pay for all those scanners, which cost about $35,000 each, and the staff to run them? Why would Bodymetrics or Macy's give you information you might use to buy jeans at Nordstrom or the Gap? And who's going to maintain the databases of garment measurements? Mall operators might conceivably install scanners to attract customers to their shopping centers, spreading the cost and benefits over all their tenants. But none has done so. Scanner technology is appealing—it's really cool to see a 3-D model of yourself—but so far the business problems have limited scanners mostly to research and a small luxury market.

"Scanning was interesting 10 years ago," scoffs Rob Holloway, who bought one of the first $[TC]^2$ scanners when he was a Levi's executive. "Now it's like a dinosaur which is still lumbering around." Holloway's latest venture takes a different approach. Founded in 2005 and located in a converted bakery across from the Pixar campus in Emeryville, California, Zafu has hand-measured thousands of women as well as 10,000 individual garments, including 500 different styles of jeans and 150 styles of bras (another hard-to-fit garment). The company had the women try on garments and talk about what they liked in the fit. Combining those comments with information on the fit of the particular styles the women tried on, the company developed a simple list of online questions—such as whether your jeans tend to gap at the waist—that segment customers by shape, allowing the Zafu Web site to suggest specific popular styles and brands likely to fit. For my extreme hourglass figure, Zafu recommended styles that included Joe's Jeans' Honey, Baby Phat's Signature Jean, DKNY's Stretch So-Low-Lita, and Christopher Blue's Lloyd's Sister.

Unlike Lane Bryant and other clothing companies, Zafu doesn't require customers to figure out for themselves which category they belong in. Its system can segment body shapes into many more categories than a shopper could remember or a single brand or retailer could fill—about 50 rather than the usual three, five, or seven. The more narrowly defined the categories, the more likely the system is to find styles that fit. The perfect system, after all, would give every customer her own unique category, tailored to her individual shape. "You have to be more granular in the way that you think about shape," says Holloway. By narrowing thousands of jeans styles down to a manageable handful, Zafu gives shoppers a viable alternative to Schwartz's backward-looking prescription. It preserves the advantages of choice but eliminates the information overload.

What Zafu doesn't do is tell you which size to buy. Its system doesn't ask for body measurements, which amateurs are notoriously bad at taking. Besides, some elements of fit are too subjective for a computer. Am I a 6 or an 8? That depends on how tight I like my clothes. It also depends on how obsequious I expect the vanity sizing to be. The only way to find the right size is to try on the clothes. But at least you know where to start.

Virginia Postrel is an *Atlantic* contributing editor and the new owner of a pair of Joe's Jeans' "booty fit" Honey jeans, recommended by Zafu. She is writing a book on glamour.

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TECHNOLOGY

Move over, iPod: Internet radio captures the enduring *magic of the medium and makes the local global.*

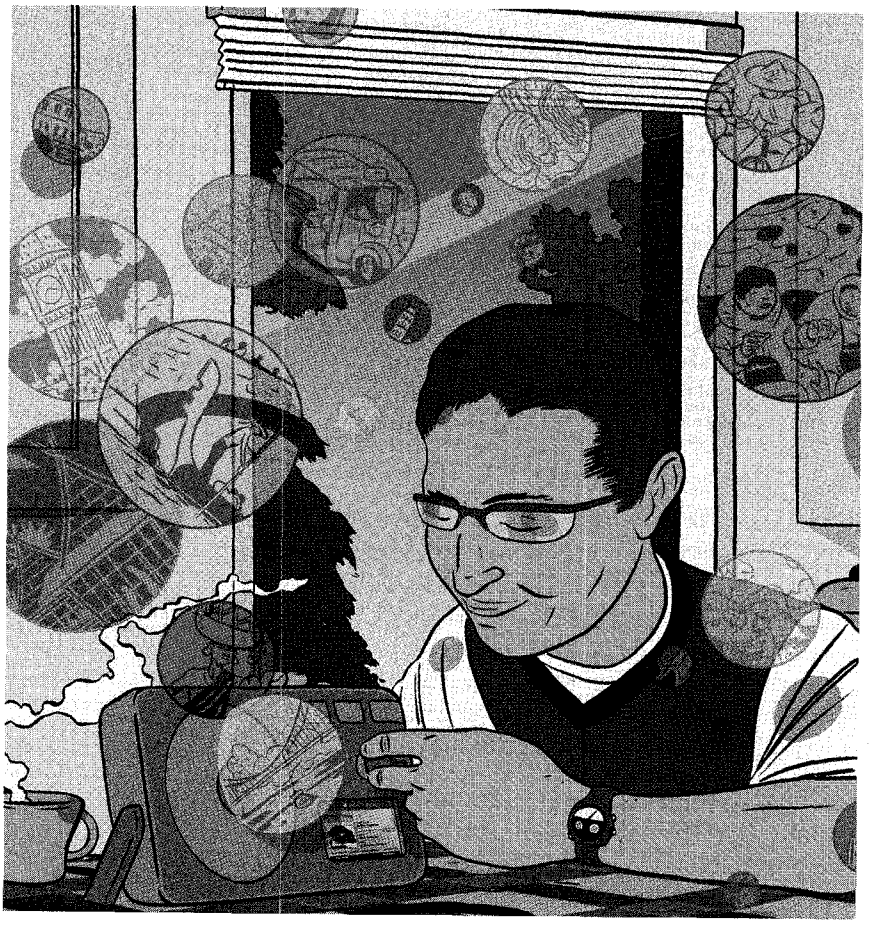
Radio Free Everywhere

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

The iPod shows you mainly what's already going on in your head—it's cool, but only as cool as solipsism can ever be. I've got a way cooler device: a squat little box that sits on your kitchen counter or your bedside table and connects you to pretty much the entire Earth. And in so doing makes you think anew about the global and the local and what community amounts to—makes you think about connection, which is, after all, the main topic of our age. It's a kind of home epistemology center that also happens to rock.

Or croon, or wail, or chat, or do anything else a radio can do. Because that's all I'm talking about: a table radio, though one that, assuming you have a broadband connection and wireless network in your house, lets you tune in to almost any station anywhere that's streaming its signal on the Net. Your computer will let you do this too (go to www.reciva.com for a portal that will let you listen in), but there's something about having a little box there in the kitchen—the whole thing is more elegant (think presets), and it connects you with the earliest moments of electronic entertainment. Because radio is, of course, the great survivor medium, a century old and still occupying more hours in the average American's week than network television—and just about every other type of entertainment, too.

At the moment, radio's most talked-about form is satellite—XM and Sirius, eager to merge their hundred-channel lists of music and talk into something profitable. But given what's out there for free, it's hard to imagine why anyone would bother to pay for a satellite subscription (except for the fairly crucial fact that you can get satellite radio in your car, while easy Web-streaming in transit is still some years off). Like reggae? There's a reggae channel on XM. But if you own an Internet radio—mine is an Acoustic Energy model, produced by an English company and available from many electronics retailers for about $300—you can listen to seven different stations from Jamaica, including MegaJamz, KOOL FM, and Love 101. Personally, I enjoy the soca show from Barbados on CBC at 98.1 FM, partly because of the music, partly because of the weather report—always 80, always breezy—and partly because of the lilting voices of the DJs. "My grandmother always used to tell me, 'Never wake up vexed,'" said the lady who does the morning shift one day last month when I was feeling, in fact, a little tense. Something in both that sentiment (the opposite of the keyed-up political hysterics on our own dial) and that last choice of word relaxed me—and almost instantly conjured up colonial history with all its complexities.



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Indeed, if, like me, you're a pathetic Anglophone, then much of the Internet listening experience is about the rise and fall of the British Empire. Except that on radio it never really fell. The BBC,

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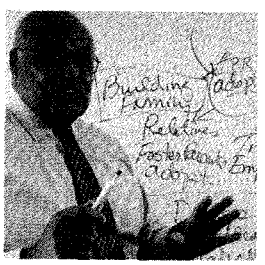

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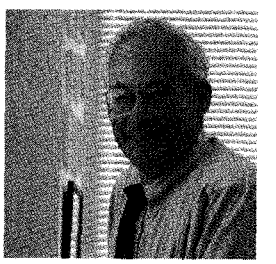

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a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run):	518,306	519,032
b. Paid Circulation (by Mail and Outside Mail)		
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2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541:	0	0
3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution:	67,594	62,918
4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS:	0	0
c. Total Paid Circulation [sum of 15b. 1), 2), 3), and 4)]:	409,506	413,144
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (by Mail and Outside Mail):		
1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541:	11,451	17,447
2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541:	0	0
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4) Outside the Mail:	3,752	3,752
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution [(sum of 15d. 1),2),3) and 4)]:	15,203	21,199
f. Total Distribution (sum of 15c. and e.):	424,709	434,343
g. Copies not Distributed:	93,597	84,689
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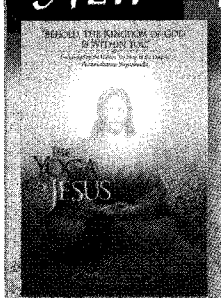

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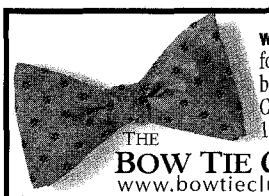

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supported by the annual license fee paid by every Brit who owns a TV, remains the dominant English voice, carrying a staggering quantity of programming. The best of America's National Public Radio programs are as good as anything on the Beeb, but the sheer volume of stuff pouring out of London certainly seems to dwarf our public-radio output. And most of it's endlessly better than the dry news and ceaseless cricket scores on the BBC's World Service, which is all that American listeners usually hear of British radio. In fact, an Internet radio is worth the money if all you do is preset the first five buttons to the BBC flagships: Radio 2, for instance, the most-listened-to station in the British Isles, plays jazz and pop music and light comedy and the occasional organ concert. Or BBC 7, established a few years ago mostly to air the system's endless archives; at any given moment, *Doctor Who* might be on the air, or episode 51 ("Life Under the Tudors") of the 240-chapter *Short History of Ireland*, or old tapes of *The Goon Show*. It also carries hours of daily children's radio, not to mention original stand-up comedy.

Best of all is BBC Radio 4. It's the talk channel, but there's not much American-style call-in-we're-all-experts-here chatter. Instead, it's the aural equivalent of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, with documentaries on "The Greenspan Years," or "Boris Yeltsin: A Flawed Giant," or "Peak Nestwatch," a nature group that campaigns against, among other things, "serial egg collectors" who shoot birds of prey. You might hear *The Food Programme* chronicling the vegetarian roots of Jainism, or an actor reading Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, or another actor performing the winning story in the National Short Story contest. There's also *The Archers*, believed to be the longest-running radio soap in the world, each episode of which lasts a quite reasonable 15 minutes.

Until it went off the air in May, my favorite BBC Radio 4 show was *A World in Your Ear*, which showcased radio from around the planet, each week on a theme. One week, for instance, it was Zimbabwe's travails: I listened to a clip

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from the state-run Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, but also ones from the community radio station in Bulawayo (a station that's been denied a license by the government, so it exists only on cassettes and CDs passed hand to hand), and from the Voice of America broadcasts into Zimbabwe (jammed by the state), and from the talk shows on Cape Town radio that have turned into a forum on Robert Mugabe's tyranny.

A World in Your Ear made clear that the real glory of Internet radio lies not in the polished programs of the BBC, delightful though they are—instead, it lies in the ability to eavesdrop on local discussions, to hear the world in its various moods and timbres. For most of the 20th century, listeners tried to do this with shortwave radio, but it was difficult, and not just because of the hissing static. Shortwave stations have generally been government operations, designed to show a certain face to the world—they have been remarkably alike in their somber (and untrustworthy) approach. But radio, at its best, is the most gloriously local of all media, hemmed in by the nearest range of hills, signals fading 10 miles out of town. We've forgotten much of this in the United States, where deregulation in recent years has allowed a few big players (Clear Channel, Infinity) to buy up thousands of stations and turn them, essentially, into repeaters for their cheap-as-possible broadcasts. It's impossible to overstate the awfulness of most of this radio. (And to say that Americans have *chosen* to listen to it is simply not true—when licenses become available, these deregulated giants have the cash to make the best offers, and then their efficiencies of scale force out the remaining competition. There are whole communities whose dial is nothing but that endless round of homogenized music and bellicose talk.)

Which is why it's so nice to be able to easily listen to what real American radio remains. My tabletop pulls in nearly every public-radio station in America, meaning that the great talk shows on dozens of stations—KUOW (Seattle), KPCC (Los Angeles), KQED (San Francisco), WBUR

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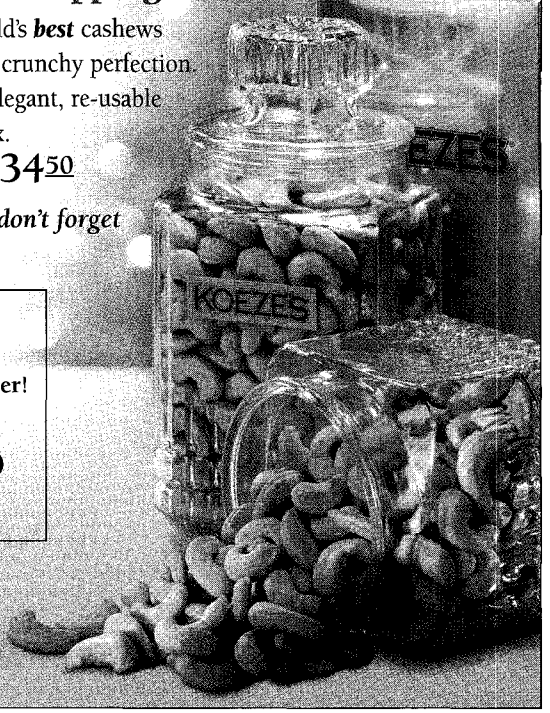

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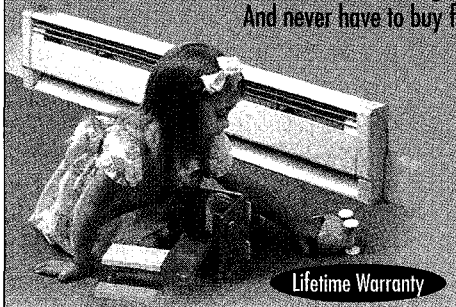

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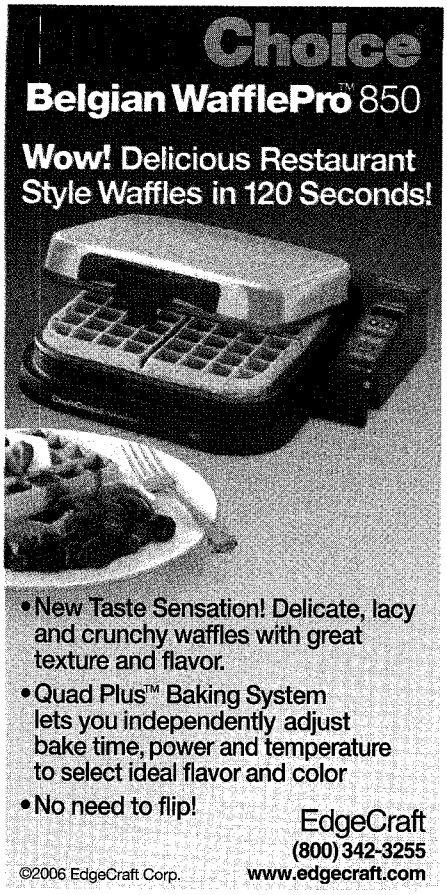

and WGBH (Boston), WNYC (guess)—are always in range. You can listen to famous music programs, like *Morning Becomes Eclectic* from KCRW (Santa Monica), but also to dozens unknown outside their home regions. I have no idea why the best early-rock-and-roll show and the best two hours of world beat pour out of public station NCPR in the far-northern New York town of Canton, but they do—Wednesdays and Fridays, three to five in the afternoon. Almost every college station in the country streams its signal, too, which means you can get one of the nicer perks of, say, a Harvard education: Every spring and winter during exam period, Harvard's WHRB airs music "orgies"—round-the-clock exhaustive stretches of everyone from Beethoven to Keith Fullerton Whitman, whose "hyper-programmed rhythms and concrete sounds, bleeding freakout guitar, Beach Boys–style sweet harmony, eastern euro-prog, vintage synth burbles, classic-era minimalism, early mainframe computer music, fluxus-lineage borderline nonsense, complete and utter chaos, doomy chamber pop, and quiet melancholy" (that's Whitman's own description of his music) played for 32 hours over the course of a few days one spring.

Radio, at its best, is the most gloriously local of all media, hemmed in by the nearest range of hills, signals fading 10 miles out of town.

Compared with all this splendor, satellite radio is exposed for what it really is: a glorified airline entertainment system—hundreds of channels signifying next to nothing. Signifying next to nothing because satellite *comes from nowhere.* Just like the Clear Channel stations, it surrenders the thing that makes radio so magical: connection to a community. As a rough rule of thumb, the smaller the community at which a signal is aimed, the more interesting the radio—it scales down better than it scales up. Unlike television, which looks amateurish until you've spent large sums of money and so must always aim for a large audience to cover its costs, radio allows anyone with talent and access to a transmitter to create compelling programs for practically nothing. And it gets more compelling—more real—the smaller it gets. So ZIZ, the voice of St. Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean, with Sugar Bowl spinning records in the morning and Ronnie Rascal in the afternoon, manages to conjure up that place effortlessly. A few hours of listening and you feel like you've wandered onto the islands, that you have some sense of the country's mores and rhythms, not to mention its economy, since the station broadcasts a series called *Ready to Welcome the World,* which aims to teach locals how to offer "world-class service" to vacationers.

Radio is mental travel. Listening to Sirius, even the world-music shows, is like traveling to Club Med. You aren't going to be disappointed or upset—but you aren't going to be excited or entertained, either. It's just like home, except someplace else. Tuning around the local-radio dial is more like staying in an endless string of bed-and-breakfasts, the kind with talkative hosts. Sometimes it's boring, but boring in an interesting way.

One of my favorite stations, for instance, is WOJB, on an Ojibwa reservation in northern Wisconsin. It programs lots of Native American music and news, and lots of other music you hear almost nowhere else. (Check out *At Risk Radio* on Friday nights for one of the few programs that can slide straight from Conlon Nancarrow and his player-piano studies into Guy Klucevscek and the "Ping Pong Polka.") But once a year, it also offers live round-the-clock coverage of the area's great sporting event, the Birkebeiner 51-kilometer ski race, which draws upward of 9,000 Nordic racers. Hundreds of them get interviewed as

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they cross the finish line, and the endless parade of flat midwestern voices ("Yep, good race, nice course. We'll come back next year.") locates the place with novelistic precision. If you're looking for a vacation to a place without cynicism, WOJB is for you. If you're eager to wallow in some sonic vice, tune in to William Hill Radio, usually geared to the betting shops of the same name across the United Kingdom—it's the only place I know where you're likely to hear live commentary on greyhound racing. If you want to time-travel back to the politics of a less hard-edged day, try KBOO in Portland, Oregon, or KPFA in Berkeley. Sometimes, when all I want is sound, I'll turn on Oman FM, for what I think is Koranic chanting—and what I know is simply otherworldly beautiful.

Internet radio has its challenges, of course. Some are technical (stations that refuse to boot up; college stations, predictably, have the best Web connections), and some are political (the recording industry, in its ongoing effort to alienate every possible customer, keeps trying to get Internet stations to pay more than terrestrial radio for the right to broadcast songs, perennially threatening to take them off the air).

And I don't listen to it all the time. Since I live in a particular place myself, I do listen to the few stations—public, community, college, and even one commercial—that still cover my locale and keep me in touch with my neighbors, my sports, my politics, my weather. But sometimes the summer sun wears me down, and I switch on the CBC Yellowknife service, just to listen to the cool temperatures of the Arctic. The last time I tuned in, someone was reading an obit for a tribal elder who had died the day before, a man who had spent the last decades of his life leading school trips into the wilderness, acquainting local youth with places he'd always known. "It wasn't unusual for him to tell the same story every night around the campfire," said one friend. "But always in a different way, so that you got a kick out of it every time."

Bill McKibben is the author of 12 books. *The Bill McKibben Reader*, an essay collection, will be published next spring.

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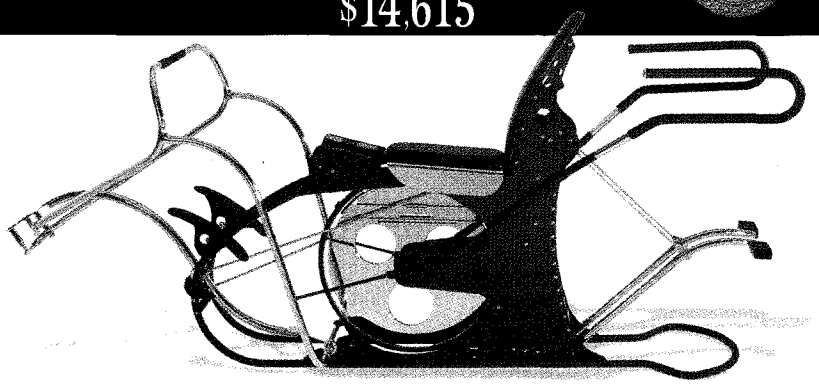

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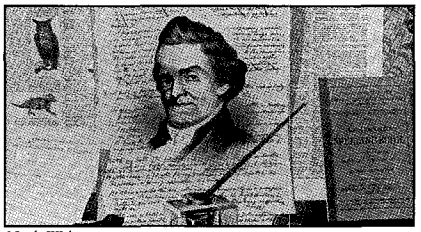

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Noah Webster

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JOSH COCHRAN

CONTENT

Newspapers should try giving readers what they want, not just what editors think they need.

The Pleasure Principle

BY MICHAEL HIRSCHORN

Must the news be boring? I don't mean to be tendentious. Asking whether news should or should not be interesting would have been seen as preposterous just a few years ago, before the extent of the newspaper crisis became fully evident. Newspaper front pages—in their modern configuration, anyway, which dates back to Joseph Pulitzer's innovations of the 1880s—had long determined how we understood what news *meant*.

Headlines were carefully calculated graphic representations of import. The lead story could get a one-, two-, or three-column headline—which could be a single- or double-decker with a subhead—a weighting mechanism meant to allow the public to shape, order, and compartmentalize its understanding of world events. More recently, the obligatory "weather photo"—a reassuring image of sunbathers, cross-country skiers in unlikely settings, uplifting ethnic or sports celebrations, or kids with cute animals—signaled that the editors were empathetic toward their readers even as they did their editorial duties, like doctors who gave lollipops to children.

News, at least as practiced by the major broadsheets for decades, was a sacred trust. Readers needed news and had limited ways to learn about current events. Editors would tell us what to read, and we would read it. News didn't have to be interesting, because it was important, and any self-styled citizen of the world needed to know what was important. Of course, print-newspaper readership is now in what may or may not be terminal decline, and news is available instantaneously on the Web, where the hallowed, exquisitely calibrated arts of the front page have been washed away like sand castles at high tide.

While one can have a separate debate over what is lost when the center no longer holds, when each of us lives in his own maximally distributed, fully customized info-space, only Pollyannas can doubt the change. And there is clearly a bigger discussion to be had about how newspapers can continue to thrive as readers increasingly move to the Web, where the profit opportunities remain slimmer than those in print. If only to forestall the inevitable deluge, why not

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consider a radical notion? Stop being important and start being interesting.

Far-out as it sounds, the raw materials for such a change are actually quite close at hand. Many newspapers already keep a running tally of what's "interesting": the real-time "Most Popular" boxes on their Web sites that list the most-e-mailed and most-blogged stories in the paper, as well as the most-used search terms. The Most Popular function serves as a shadow front page, highlighting what readers find interesting enough to send along to their friends or blog about, as opposed to what the editors want them to read. It's a rough gauge of reader behavior, to be sure, but as it turns out, a fairly consistent one.

In my own attempt to formulate a reader-response theory, I reviewed a week's worth of front pages of *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The New York Times* in September and compared them with each day's most-e-mailed list, which seemed more useful than the most-blogged list, because it factors out agenda-driven blogging.

I had expected the most-e-mailed results to track the lineups of the more baldly audience-focused TV newscasts, which have increasingly made a fetish of "news that matters to you," and hence are packed with tedious features on your health, your real estate, your job, your children, and so forth. Instead, the most-e-mailed lists, despite a smattering of parochial concerns, were a rich stew of global affairs, provocative insight, hot-button issues, pop culture, compelling narrative, and enlightened localism. In short, they were interesting. What they were not, generally, was *important*, at least not in the grand tectonic geopolitical sense.

Among the most-e-mailed articles on Friday, September 14, for example, was a feature that ran in *The New York Times*' second arts section called "Paths of Resistance in the East Village." The writer, John Strausbaugh, a particularly gifted chronicler of New Yorkiana, toured Manhattan's legendarily left-leaning neighborhood with the photographer and videographer Clayton Patterson, who'd been tracking the transformation of the

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neighborhood from radical outpost to high-priced BoBo nesting perch for almost 30 years. It was a piece brimming with history, politics, real estate, and local lore, going back to 1857 and the first clashes between police and recent immigrants.

Two days earlier, as the front page commemorated the sixth anniversary of 9/11, the most-e-mailed list contained two stories about a just-deceased parrot named Alex, who in his 31 years had learned some 150 words; op-eds by Thomas Friedman and Maureen Dowd, then still confined to the digital purdah of TimesSelect and expostulating on China and throwing shade at General Petraeus, respectively; a report from Dresden about Germans' peculiar fascination with Native American culture; and a trend piece about new social-networking sites for older people. Accompanying the 9/11 coverage on the *Times* front page, meanwhile, were reports on President Bush's plans for the Justice Department, and Petraeus's and Ryan Crocker's arguments for ongoing U.S. involvement in Iraq; and, to show it was not all doom and gloom, a report from New York Fashion Week, complete with photo of Victoria Beckham. This story, despite a kicky header—"A Designer Gives a Spice Girl Some Lessons on What's Sexy"—did not make the most-e-mailed list.

That Tuesday, *Los Angeles Times* e-mailers showed interest in a study that delineated differences in the brains of left- and right-wing people, and in a story about nuns in Santa Barbara who were about to lose their convent to pay debts incurred by a local church sex-abuse scandal. Among the most viewed stories was a Web-only report about how Vanessa Hudgens, star of the megahit *High School Musical*, and Disney were handling the revelation of a nude photo of the starlet, presumably a topic of great interest to *The Times*' entertainment-business-heavy readership. The front page, meanwhile, covered Petraeus's testimony before Congress, its implications for Bush's Iraq policy, ongoing unrest in Pakistan, and the latest turn in the Clinton-Hsu fund-raising scandal, all of which more or less mimicked the other dailies, and news of which was available on virtually every Web portal. Over at *The Washington Post*, a trend piece on the rise of the "alpha geezer" (pushed onto page B3 of the print edition) made the e-mail rounds.

When newspapers and e-mailers *do* click, it's not hard to see why. *The New York Times* hit the most-e-mailed jackpot with a Friday piece on San Francisco's plan to offer health care to every uninsured resident—a story with potential canary-in-a-coal-mine significance for the grand 2008 debate on health care, and a bit of news-you-can-use to boot. And two *L.A. Times* front-page stories made the most-e-mailed list on Tuesday: a sad, gripping tale of a baby's death on skid row and a brilliant feature—rich with the preposterousness of poseurish environmentalism—about people who'd decided to eat only food they could forage, including from Dumpsters.

> What newspaper readers think is interesting and what editors think is important tends to overlap less than one-quarter of the time.

Nevertheless, based on my very unscientific analysis, what readers think is interesting and what editors think is important tends to overlap less than one-quarter of the time. This could simply mean that because hard news is ubiquitous or already on the front page, Web users assume their friends already know about it and don't need an e-mail to bring it to their attention.

But wouldn't readers forward *anything* they find interesting? My more sobering conclusion is that readers might no longer need newspapers for news. And by "news" I mean the traditional newspaper functions of reporting on

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congressional hearings, city-council meetings, sporting events, earnings reports, and so forth. This is now commodity information, available instantly and everywhere, thanks to the wires and more-specialized services. Even "scoops," traditionally the gas that fuels the journos' competitive fires, bring only bragging rights, since what's in the morning's newspaper has already been digested on the Web, the radio, and the morning TV shows, and has been deposited in your in-box before you can be bothered to pick up an actual newspaper.

What unites the most-e-mailed list (and granted, it's hard to draw a single thread through stories about parrots, nuns, and Dumpster-diving foodies) is uniqueness. These stories, as they say in marketing, offer a "value add," something that's not available on the vaguely Soviet-seeming syndication-fed news pages of AOL, Yahoo, or Google. The real value now lies in non-commodifiable virtues like deep reporting, strong narrative, distinct point of view, and sharp analysis, which even in the blogger era (or *especially* in the blogger era) is available only piecemeal. We've seen this need for reinvention before, as the newsweeklies have found their week-in-review function made ever more vestigial by the increasingly fast news cycle. *The New York Times* implicitly conceded the primacy of opinion and analysis when it elected to put Friedman—at the moment its most important asset—and other opinion writers behind the digital wall with TimesSelect. (And TimesSelect's subsequent discontinuation isn't necessarily a blot on the escutcheons of Friedman et al. More likely, it's evidence of the impossibility of getting Web users to pay for anything other than proprietary information, live sports, or porn.)

Upping the "interesting" quotient of news is not an argument for abdicating vital traditional fourth-estate functions, just reimagining them. The lapses in oversight by the press in the lead-up to and early days of the Iraq War allowed the Bush administration to fudge democratic norms in ways that will haunt us for years. But did this happen because the newspapers didn't report the news (the view held by hard-newsies) or because (my favored explanation) newspapers didn't *market* the news, didn't add enough value in terms of explaining what the news meant and why you, the media-addled citizen of the digital nation, should have cared about it? Savvy packaging of news might have allowed the public a better entrée into complex issues that were too often presented as spinach.

As a practical matter, this marketing calls for a tactical retreat for newspapers' front pages away from commodity news (the aforementioned council meetings and so forth, all of which could now be covered by someone else, maybe one of those newfangled citizen-journalists) and toward something more muscular and even—at risk of total apostasy—more pleasurable. By "pleasurable," I mean stories that are just fun to read. And they don't all have to be about *Dancing With the Stars*—or parrots. Another example: In late August, *The New York Times* ran a story about new scientific explanations of the mechanics of out-of-body experiences. Surely this was a story with wide appeal, engaging everyone from evangelicals to philosophers to the death-obsessed to current and former acid-heads. Yet it was buried in the back of the front section. Meanwhile, the front page spotlighted a story about minor college sports teams (fencing, swimming) needing to hustle to find funding, an issue with perhaps a bigger demographic footprint, but of literally zero interest to anyone not immediately affected.

So what might the "news"-free front page of the future look like? Interestingly, Rupert Murdoch's two New York–based newspapers—the *New York Post* and his new toy, *The Wall Street Journal*—are already offering unique takes on non-commodified news. The *Post* is invariably described as a "guilty pleasure," as if reading news you're actually interested in is something to apologize for. Virtually alone among the top-10 dailies, it is growing in circulation (a 25-cent cover price doesn't hurt). The *Post* has many flaws, of course, among them shameless pandering, horribly punny headlines, occasionally

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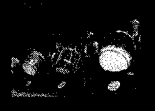

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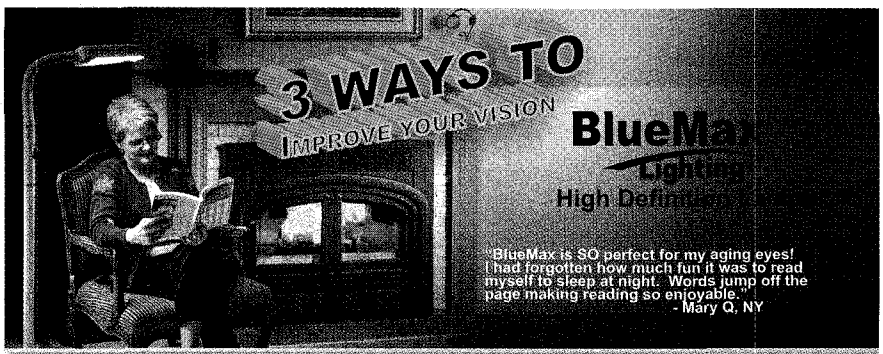

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shocking quasi-literacy, and a worldview at times not much more sophisticated than that of William Randolph Hearst's turn-of-the-last-century rags. But it has achieved something unique in American journalism: It is a must-read daily newspaper for the quadrant of Manhattan society it so deftly courts. And it has become so by uncannily mirroring what its readership is interested in on any given day: usually a yeasty mix of political outrage, blood-boiling hypocrisy, misbehaving masters of the universe, and hot babes in some sort of peril. *The Journal*, as a business paper, has been using its front-page news digest to dispense with commodity news for decades, while employing its valuable real estate to pinpoint trends, elevate key personalities, and, with the lighter middle-column stories, reinforce its brand of wry amusement at the capitalist carnival. I may be imagining this, but even as Murdoch completes his takeover, the paper seems to be showing an increased willingness to throw itself about, to stamp itself on the financial world—an early-October leader (and most-e-mailed fave) declaring the end of the "Wal-Mart Era" being a prime example.

A reimagined broadsheet front page could draw from the *Post*'s id and *The Journal*'s superego, doing away with the soggy middle of commodity news in favor of a high-low mix of agenda-setting reportage and analysis, strong storytelling on topics not being covered everywhere else, and saucy, knowing takeouts on people the readership actually cares about. It would, in essence, invert the traditional relationship the newspaper has with readers. The old front page assumed your interest; the new front page would earn it. Like it or not, to compete in this new era, even serious news might need to be sexed-up, marketed with the kind of zeal that so far only Murdoch has been willing to muster. The point is not moving to an all-Britney-all-the-time footing. The most-e-mailed lists suggest that readers will consume meaningful, interesting (and maybe even "important") journalism if they feel compelled, beguiled, seduced. The rest is just so much squawking.

Michael Hirschorn is an *Atlantic* contributing editor.

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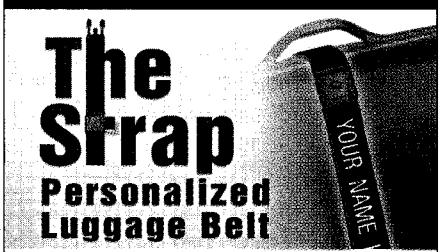

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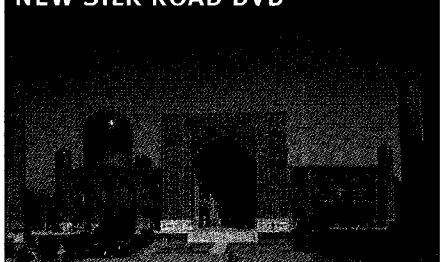

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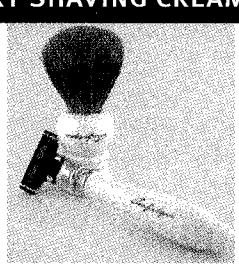

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WORD FUGITIVES

BY BARBARA WALLRAFF

In the July/August issue, we sought a name for the "tai chi–like gyrations" required to activate an automatic faucet or towel dispenser. Note the high degree of difficulty demanded of coiners: The wanted word has to apply both to getting wet and to towel-drying.

A term that applies to neither but merits an honorable mention anyway came from Geoffrey Litwack, of Los Angeles, who wrote, "When I pass my hand under an automatic dryer in a public restroom, I call it a *heat wave*." Closer to the mark were *towel chi*, from Gunnar Miller, of Frankfurt, Germany; *dry chi*, from more than one reader; and *hand-dry coordination*, from Marc Werlinsky, of Broomall, Pa.

Among faucet-only coinages, the most commonly suggested was *tap dancing*. More idiosyncratically, Julian Adler, of Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., wrote, "I think the term should be *insinktual responses*. On a bad day, however, the more appropriate term might be *debasinment*."

Christian Madsen, of La Canada, Calif., covered both faucet and towel territory but took two coinages to do it: "How about the movements derived from ancient Asian fighting techniques, *faucetsu* and *drykwondo*?" Elaine Spiller, of Durham, N.C., got them both into one with *digitsu*. Joseph Grayson, of Far Rockaway, N.Y., wrote, "I thought since the purpose of the hands-free is, in part, to be more sanitary, a good term for this activity would be *germnastics*." And Lisa Litzinger, of Philadelphia, wrote, "When trying to coax water and towels from such devices, my method is to wave at the thing just like I'd wave hello to a person. So I'd like to call it the *Hi Gene wave*." John Ramos, of Duluth, Minn., wrote, "The elaborate performance one must go through to attract the attention of a paper- or water-dispensing sensor is known as a *come-on*."

But Daniel Okrent, of South Wellfleet, Mass., takes top honors. He wrote, "I call this kind of tai chi *handwrithing*—and when it's so frustrating it causes me to mutter oaths, it's *cursive handwrithing*."

Also requested in the July/August issue was a word for "unpleasant occurrences that come with a job"—that is, a word for the opposite of a perquisite. Here the most popular suggestion was *cringe benefit*. Arno McTavin, of Longmont, Colo., proposed *fringe badefit*; Ann Rock, of Grosse Pointe Park, Mich., the rather erudite *not-a-bene*; and a few readers the Judeo-Christian *trials of job*.

Bruce Evans, of Mesa, Ariz., suggested *dreckuisite*; Apryl Lamb, of Durham, N.C., *suquisite*; and more than one reader *irquisite*. Gail Wells, of Corvallis, Ore., wrote, "I'd call them *stuckquisites*, as in 'Guess I'm *stuckquisite* again.'" David Noller, of Burbank, Calif., wrote, "This is known as a *gozewit*—as in, 'Hey buddy, dat goze wit' da territory!'"

All lots of fun, but would anyone who heard or read those words understand them? Laura Steele, of Mishawaka, Ind., takes top honors for *icks of the trade*.

Now DEBBIE KINERK, of Tacoma, Wash., writes, "After years of believing that *malinger* means 'to tarry beyond one's welcome' or 'to live an excessively long life,' I was disappointed to learn that the word really means 'shirk.' Can we invent a word for the meaning I misunderstood?"

And TOM GORDON, of Arlington, Va., writes, "I'm going through a divorce and am looking for a word to describe my soon-to-be-ex. Nothing nasty, please—we're on good terms with each other. What word would mean the opposite of *fiancé(e)*?"

Send words that meet Debbie Kinerk's or Tom Gordon's needs to Word Fugitives, The Atlantic Monthly, *P.O. Box 67375, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, or visit the Word Fugitives page on our Web site, at www.theatlantic.com/fugitives. Submissions must be received by December 31. Use the same addresses to submit word fugitives that you'd like* The Atlantic's *help in finding. Letters become the property of Word Fugitives and may be edited.*

Readers whose queries are published and those whose words are singled out for top honors will each receive, with our thanks, a selection of recent autographed books by Atlantic *authors. The next installment's correspondents will be sent* Are We Rome? *by Cullen Murphy;* God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America, *by Hanna Rosin; and my own* Word Fugitives.

GREG CLARKE

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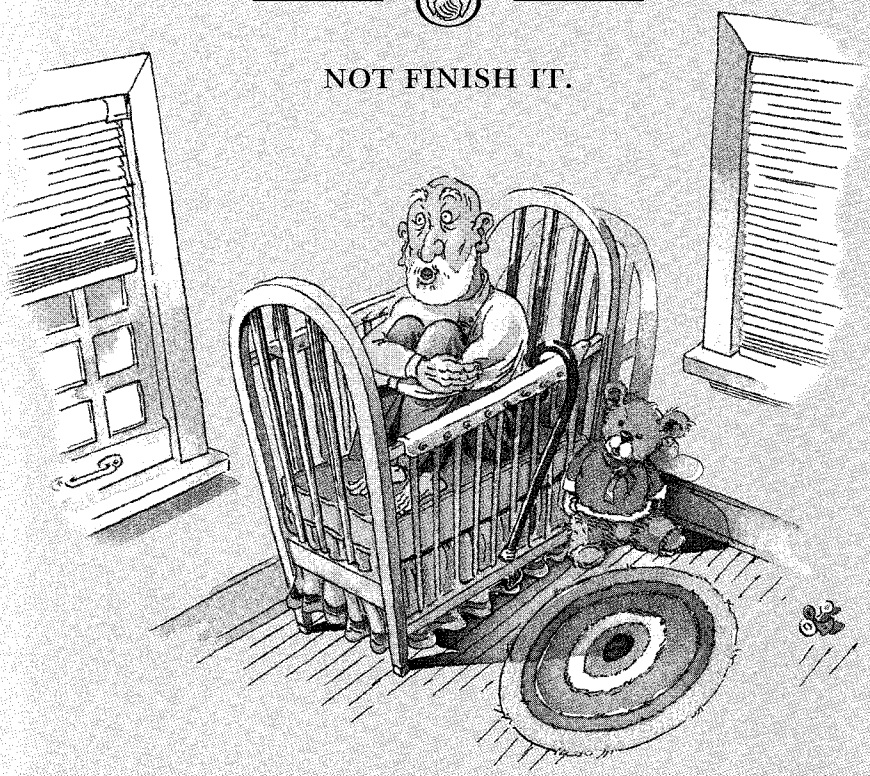

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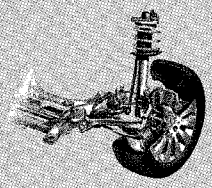

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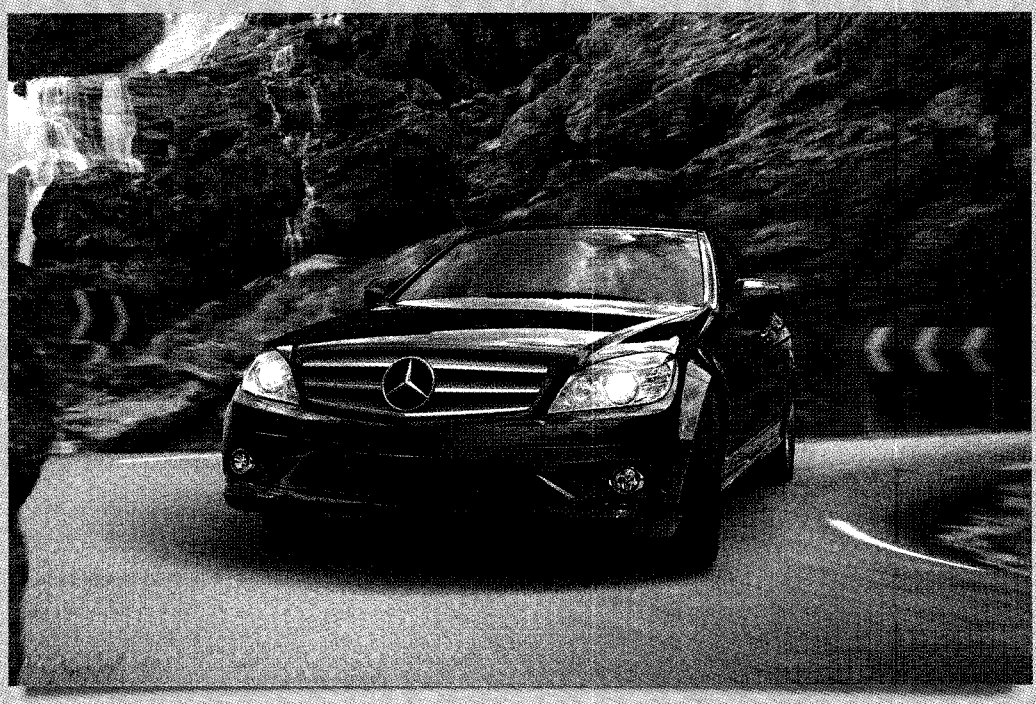

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